THE WHIMSY GIRL

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CHARLOTTE CANTY

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The Whimsy Girl

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"SOMETIMES," SHE RESUMED IN A MYSTERIOUS UNDERTONE, "THE CLOUDS COME VERY LOW, AN' Y' CAN HEAR 'EM TALKING."
—*(Page 16.)*

The Whimsy Girl

By

Charlotte Canty

Frontispiece by
Robert W. Amick

New York
Dodd, Mead and Company
1913

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Published, September, 1913

To
"WENDY"
(Carlin Eastwood)
who made life possible for
THE BOY
and
WITCHIE

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The Whimsy Girl

CHAPTER I

THE PRINCESS OF THE HILLTOP

"A PATIENT down here, Dad?" Bob Burchard looked up into the doctor's face for his answering nod as the motor-car swung along through a jumble of crossing streets in San Francisco's Latin quarter. "Looks as though some naughty child had stolen the scissors and cut up the city pie-fashion," he pursued, for the streets crossed at many angles, and regularity was a lost word. The buildings, quaintly shaped to fit their sharp-pointed lots, had a curious air of having purposely twisted themselves out of line, and some of them seemed ready to perform further gymnastic feats.

The doctor laughed, and the Boy went on:

"This is the village of Choppy Town;
The streets run up and the streets run down,

> And any wandering alley may
> Shove your house right out of its way
> Unless——

"Why, Dad, we're not going up Telegraph Hill, are we?"

"Up the hill," returned the doctor, smilingly. "Why not, Boy? The street goes right up."

"Yes, it does; but I'll bet it was dragged, stoned, beaten and pounded into going up. It's like a flat band put on to hold the hill down in place. I shouldn't wonder if some day the hill would rise up, wiggle that flat road to pieces and shake it off, going back to its own natural curving dips and winding ways. I haven't been up here since I was a youngster, have I?"

"No, I think not; certainly not during your school years. But you'll find the other side of the hill unchanged; as rough and broken up and hard to climb as even you will desire. We'll leave the machine at the top and walk down to the house."

"And who's your patient, Dad?"

"A little girl; the daughter of a Greek fisherman."

"Aren't they fascinating chaps,—those Greeks that drift here? I've often spent hours down at the wharf watching them furl their brown lateen sails, or take in their nets. They're a picturesque lot; half of them look like poets, and half like pirates. Queer to find such types in an American city."

"Nearly all nationalities are represented here on Telegraph Hill," returned the doctor. "My little patient is an odd composite, —Polish mother, Greek father,—a pair of eager young visionaries who came to this country with Heaven knows what high dream in their hearts. But the poor mother was injured and died at the child's birth, and the little mite has spent her whole life in one small room. She has never walked."

"But who takes care of her?" asked the Boy, his attention instantly engaged.

"Care? Well, she doesn't get very much care. There's a step-mother, and a brood of small children; I haven't been able to count them as yet. The father has become a broken-spirited toiler; he hasn't even kept his lamp of hope burning, and that's bad, for one who is by nature silent and melancholy. But Bianca has learned to endure, and she doesn't look for much care. I'd like to send her to a hospital, but these ignorant foreigners are frightened at the very word. Still, the small girl's coming along well. You'll be interested in her. Her case, by the way, is very like that of Donald Hallowell."

"Good old Don!" exclaimed the Boy. "Doesn't it make you feel like swelling up till you smash your ribs every time you see him? Think what a sick little tyke he was two years ago! He's as husky now as any fellow of his age, and he's going to make a

whacking good football player. No wonder his mother's so happy these days."

"Yes, she is happy," the doctor agreed, "and she's very proud of her boy. But still she has her lonely hours, with Donald at school and no other child in the home. I wish——"

The doctor did not say what he wished, for the machine had started to climb the steep hill, and it required his whole attention. But the Boy was free to look about at a crowd of children, gathering from every direction around the car. His first impression was a blur of smudgy faces and shining dark eyes; in those points all the children seemed alike. A closer look showed that they were of many nations;—Italian, French, Hebrew, German, Irish, Syrian; there were one or two Chinese mites and a Japanese lad of seven or eight, who found it hard work to stay ahead of a small and very black African. Hill-climbing autos were still

a novelty, and the children scampered about the machine, keeping even with its slackened pace and chattering in excitement. Every house contributed a child or two, and the crowd grew steadily.

The Boy turned a quizzical face to his father.

"Now, honest, Dad, are you or are you not the Pied Piper? Do you intend to shut 'em up in the hill when you get to the top?"

"Thought you'd enjoy it," remarked the doctor, with an amused glance at their eager retinue; and he waved a signal to a big boy at the edge of the crowd. "That's Baptiste," he explained. "I pay him a nickel to guard the car while I go down to my patient. The children stay around the machine, but Baptiste won't let one of them touch it."

The lad was already getting his army under control. At his command the children fell back, until, at the summit of the

hill, where the doctor and the Boy stepped out, Baptiste proudly patrolled two feet of clear space around the car.

"This way," called the doctor, briskly, but a new vision had enchained the Boy;—the widespread picture of San Francisco Bay lying before them. They could see the long sweep of it, from the far channels where lie the deep-water ships at rest, to the Golden Gate where they sail out upon the world's great seas.

"Come on, son," called the doctor again, and the Boy obeyed, following his father down some crazy stairs, stuck crookedly into the clay hill.

"Careful!" warned the doctor, but the Boy was now alert, studying the curious litter of discarded objects along the path. Old kitchen utensils, empty tomato cans, corn cobs and piles of corn husks had to be avoided if one would walk the steep and narrow way. Bob stopped to look about,

and the doctor waited, while he surveyed the queer little village of shacks and shanties hung upon the side of the hill.

Most of the dwellings were unpainted or whitewashed. All were pitched at a precarious angle on the slope. There were few fences; the houses might be private, but the yards were common property, open thoroughfares. Crooked footpaths led in and out among them, and one might walk with some security along these until challenged by a belligerent or over-playful goat. For each household there seemed to be at least one goat; some yards held two or three, and perhaps a bleating kid.

The Boy looked at his father, his eyes shining with amusement and interest.

"Are we really on the outside of the hill, Dad? Or have you magicked us inside to another world?"

"We're outside, safe enough," rejoined the doctor, "but it's probably one of the

most curious communities in the world. Poverty is picturesque in a place like this," he went on, indicating the magnificent view of blue bay and beautiful surrounding hills.

"Picturesque, yes," agreed the Boy, "but—look out! You're getting tangled up in that old bed-spring! Evidently," he laughed, as the doctor untangled himself from the wires, "the inhabitants of this bird's-nest village look so much at the outside view that they haven't time to see this unsightly muddle at their feet. All right, Dad?"

"All right," rejoined the doctor, throwing the snarl of wire aside. "Here we are at the castle of the Princess Bianca," and he clambered down over a pile of empty bottles and walked along a weed-bordered path to a doorsill made of two old soap-boxes.

The Boy stared at the "castle"; it was little more than a whitewashed shed, originally built of scrap lumber and patched

with fragments of canvas, bits of old tin, or lengths of waste wood. There was no window, but the single narrow door was ajar, held open by a crude hook that fastened it to the wall. The doctor stood for a moment on the threshold, and the Boy joined him, looking curiously at the little patient within.

She was a tiny girl, thin and white. Her eyes and hair looked dark at the first glance, but when the Boy stepped indoors he could see that there were golden lights in the eyes and that her hair was a rich bronze. A grave sweetness gave distinction to her delicate face, and she tried to smile in response to the doctor's cheery greeting.

"How's my little Bianca to-day?" he asked, stepping close to the bed.

She looked at him, her eyes very solemn.

"How do you feel?" he pursued.

She shook her head wearily.

"Punk," she answered.

The Boy could not repress a gasp, but the small patient was giving her whole attention to his father.

"Is the pain so hard?" asked the doctor, sympathetically.

"Bet it is," said the little girl. "It's sump'n fierce."

"Well, well, well," he rejoined heartily, to cover a choking sound from the Boy. "And I thought that it wasn't going to hurt much, didn't I?"

"Yes," she assented. "You said that it wouldn't be very bad, but I knew you were only jollyin'."

Again the Boy had a struggle to control his laughter. Slang passed unchallenged among his friends, circulating as the accepted coinage of speech, but slang from a child of this ethereal type was very different from slang on the lips of a college freshman. She could not be more than five years

old, he thought; six, at most. Keenly interested, he came forward to be presented.

"My boy,—my son Robert, Bianca," said the doctor.

The little girl studied him in shy silence.

"He's a big fellow, isn't he?" went on Dr. Burchard. "But, you see, he hasn't had to lie in bed all his life, as you have. Sometimes he helps me when he goes about with me; I'll have him give me a hand with you now, just to show you."

And while the doctor directed, the Boy moved quickly about, helping to get the little patient more comfortably settled in her ragged bed.

"It's pretty mussy," she apologised, "and not so very clean, but the kids on the hill come to see me, y' know, an' they climb all over it."

"All over your bed!" exclaimed the Boy.

"Sure," she rejoined. "Seven or eight of 'em, sometimes. It's good an' wide; four

of us sleep in it every night," she added, proudly.

The doctor looked up swiftly and frowned.

"You've never told me that before," he said. "Isn't there any other place for those children to sleep?"

"Nope," she answered, with uncomplaining candour. "That's the worst of it with babies. If they were kittens y' could put 'em into baskets an' shove 'em under the stove, but y' can't do that with children."

"No, I suppose not," agreed the doctor, but he was still frowning, and he added abruptly: "Where's your mother?"

"Oh, she's got a job. Mis' Steinhauer, the butcher's wife, got a new baby, an' ma's goin' to take care o' the old one an' help with the work. She's goin' to get a dollar a day for it,—just as much as the old man makes," she boasted, sweetly.

"Can you beat that?" chaffed the Boy. But the doctor looked grave and turned

away; he crossed to the door and stood there, his thoughtful frown deepening.

"He'd have to go some to beat it," observed Bianca. "But I guess he must come near it. The kids on the hill are all crazy about his aut'mobile; one o' them said that it must be worth pretty near a hundred dollars. Is it?" she demanded.

"It's worth pretty far from a hundred dollars," said the Boy, smiling as he mentally reviewed the expensive fittings of the doctor's new machine.

"I thought so," said Bianca, with a wise little nod of her head. "He couldn't spend that much on one aut'mobile. Doctors don't really work, do they?"

"I've always thought they do, Bianca," said the Boy.

"Well, they always seem to wear their Sunday clothes," she reasoned. "I've never seen him with a blue flannel shirt on,—not even once."

The Boy laughed ringingly, and the doctor strolled back from the open door and made ready to leave.

"I'm coming again to-morrow," he said. "Will you ask your mother to be here, Bianca? Tell her that I want to talk to her; that I must see her."

"I'm coming, too," said the Boy. "Will you let me come, Bianca?"

"Sure," she rejoined in her light, high voice, and her dark eyes sparkled with pleasure. "Do you like my house?" she unexpectedly added.

"Like your house!" The Boy was somewhat taken aback. "Why,—your house is —is—all right, Bianca, isn't it?"

"Yes, I guess so," said the little girl, relieved. "Anyway, the hill is, an' we have the Bay an' we have the winds—oh, they're lots of fun. The little ones sing an' the big ones scold, an' up in our sky the clouds run races—but the black ones nearly always

beat. There aren't any black ones there now, are there?" She bent her neck, scanning her world of hillside and bay and sky. "No; they're just the fat, lazy, white kind; they're the breasts of the sky swans, sailing about in the blue."

She lay silent watching them, and the Boy waited in wordless amaze.

"Sometimes," she resumed in a mysterious undertone, "the clouds come very low, an' y' can hear 'em talking, but y' have to listen hard or y' won't hear what they say; I often know when they're goin' to have a party, an' they dress up in pink an' lavender and yellow. It's always in the afternoon when the grey water goes out o' the bay, an' the gold water comes in an' splashes about the ships."

"You little—little whimsy girl!" exclaimed the Boy. "Can you get all that much from just the bit of the world that you can see through this doorway?" He

studied the view permitted to her; the hill sloped abruptly down from the doorway, cutting off from her sight everything but the sky and the Bay and a glimpse of distant hills lying beyond the water and the mist.

"Get all—all what?" The little girl was startled back into her commonplace mood.

"All that you've been telling me," said the Boy, his keen glance coming back to her. "I must go now, but I'll come to-morrow, and we'll talk things over," and he darted out at the doorway to follow his father.

Dr. Burchard was hastening up the steep path, his head down, his face very serious, and the Boy followed in silence until they reached the motor-car and Baptiste. The car was still an object of curious attention, but the valiant guard patrolled his two feet of clear space and the children kept at a safe distance. In front of the machine and

behind it Baptiste had compact stacks of rocks, placed within easy reach.

"To keep off the fraish keed," he explained, with the most engaging of smiles. "Sometimes fraish keed come, make lots tr-rouble—not stay back weeth other bunch; then I peeck up r-rock, an' he get away prett' queeck."

He had demolished the neat piles and scattered the rocks by the time Dr. Burchard entered the car. The Boy waited to pay Baptiste and then sprang in beside his father.

"Dad," he said, eagerly, "I want to come again to see Bianca, if I may. She's the most interesting——"

"She's the most pitifully neglected child I know," said the doctor, roused. "Fancy crowding other children into that bed with her at night! There's something wrong with the machine, Boy. Get out and look at the crank, will you?"

The Boy rose instantly and leaped out of the car, but instead of the light touch of his feet on firm ground, he felt the jar of an unsteady obstacle, a sharp wrench at his knee as he struggled to regain his balance; and he went down heavily among the rocks that Baptiste had scattered over the road.

CHAPTER II

A CHANGE OF RÔLES

It was more than a week before the Boy again made the trip with his father up the steep slope of Telegraph Hill. This time he was the centre of interest as the band of children followed, for beside him in the tonneau lay a pair of new crutches. Many of the children had been present when he fell on the rocks that Baptiste had scattered in the road, and the accident had been fully discussed, so that those who had not seen it knew almost as much about it as the ones who had. Crowding about the car they clamoured questions and congratulations in a confused jumble that made it hard for the Boy to listen to what his father was saying. He understood without hearing the

words, however, and was ready, as usual, with a cheerful rejoinder.

"I'll be careful, of course, Dad. I promise on my crutches. I'll step over every ambushed tomato can and every lurking pile of ashes, and 'they sho'ly won't git me,' for I will watch out," he finished, gaily paraphrasing Riley.

The doctor looked dubious.

"If I were convinced that it would do any good," he said. "I mean, of course, in proportion to the risk you take——"

"Why, Dad, you know I did Donald Hallowell no end of good just by telling him stories when he was strapped down to his bed. I can't go to school with this outfit of extra wooden legs," and he indicated the crutches. "I'm loafing around most of the day with only half enough to do. And if I can help Bianca as I did Don—if I can make her forget her pain just by spinning a yarn or two——"

"Donald's case was very different," remonstrated the doctor. "He didn't live in a shack on a cliff, and you weren't laid up with a badly wrenched knee. The very effort of walking down the hill to her house may be too much for you."

"Let me try, Dad," coaxed the Boy. "If I think there's any danger of hurting myself I'll stand still and call for you; I'll submit to being ingloriously led back to the machine without even a glance at the castle of the Princess Bianca."

"And if you don't have to call for me?"

"Why, then, you'll go on to your other patients, leaving Bianca to the end of your list. When you get through there I'll go home with you."

The doctor was still unconvinced when he brought his machine to a standstill at the top of the hill, and he watched with some concern as the Boy made his way down the

slope, sending back a mock-heroic monologue:

"Hah, you lie in wait, Sir Lard Can? Out upon you! Think you that I fear you, Corn Cob? And you, nestling in the young April grass, what are you? By me faith, an ancient coffee pot, sans spout, sans bottom, sans top, sans everything! A blow of me spear and you're down, villain, over the cliff! Aha!"

His crutches sent the various objects flying right and left, but he stopped before the pile of bottles above Bianca's house. The doctor was watching, and the Boy smiled reassuringly as he declaimed:

"Sir Robert fixed his fiery eye
Upon a pile of bottles high,
Striving to meet the arching sky.

"'Full many a knight there might be found
Who'd scatter thee upon the ground;
But I—I boldly walk around!'"

And "boldly" he walked around them, waving a crutch from Bianca's doorsill as the doctor started the automobile.

The little girl was lying very still, cuddled low over something that she was fondling in her hands. She straightened up with a crow of greeting as the Boy looked in at the door, but her changeful face paled at sight of his crutches, and her eyes opened wide.

"Aw, kid," she said in her soft, sweet voice, "do you have to carry them broomsticks to get around?"

"That's what I do," cheerily rejoined the Boy. "But I'm lucky to get around at all in this much time."

"Yes," said the little girl. "I think you're right, there." And she added wistfully: "D' you s'pose the doctor could rig up a pair for me?—eight-year-old size?"

"Eight!" cried the Boy in astonishment. "You're not eight, are you, Bianca?"

"Eight and then some," she seriously an-

swered. "Eight when it was raining so hard;—January, isn't it, when it rains? An' now it's——"

"It's April," said the Boy. "Just the beginning of the month of crocus and iris. Do you know the iris, Bianca?"

"Sure," she replied. "Lots o' Irish live on the hill. There's the Higginses an' the Reillys an' the Connellys—d' you know their white goat? An'——"

"I said iris," explained the Boy, laughing. "It's a flower, a spring flower——"

"Jiminy! A flower with springs in it?"

"Oh, no. I'll have to get some for you and let you see. May I sit down?" he asked, perching on the edge of her bed.

"Not there! Jee-rusalem, no!" she shrieked. "There's somebody right under the covers there. It's Garibaldi. Didn't y' see him go down?"

"Who? What? Where?" The Boy was

groping about in excitement over the spot indicated.

"Here. Don't move! Ah-h-h!" She stretched down in some inexplicable way, and dragged up from the tangle of torn bed covers a blinking horned toad.

"I was talking to him when you came in," she explained, "and then I forgot him. But I don't want him all squashed up," she went on, caressing him tenderly.

"No, of course not," warmly agreed the Boy, looking at the curious creature. "Where in the world did you get him?"

"One o' the kids on the hill has an uncle that lives up in the country, an' he sent him down to me; sent him scrunched up in a tiny box with his tail bent up over his head. I thought he'd never get straightened out, but he's all right now," she observed, screwing a critical eye on the odd little pet in her palm.

"What do you call him?"

"Julius Cæsar Garibaldi."

"Some class to that name," observed the Boy.

"I could have had one twice as long," said Bianca, "but that's long enough for a horned toad; don't y' think so?"

"Seems so to me," he gravely agreed. "Are you fond of naming people and things, Bianca?"

She blushed and was silent.

"You make me think of the little chap that gave me my name," he went on.

"Your name?" Bianca looked up questioningly.

"Yes. The little fellow who called me the Nonsense Boy. He was very ill two years ago, and I used to go to see him and tell him stories, and——"

"Oo-o-o, can you tell stories?"

The Boy fidgeted under her awestruck admiration.

"Why, yes,—a—a—little," he said with

an embarrassed flush. "I thought you might like to have me tell you some. Would you?"

"Oo, ye-e-s," was the rapt answer, and the Boy's embarrassment grew.

"I'm really not a head-liner," he said, hurriedly, "though I have told some listenable yarns. I wonder why they don't call a teller of tales a tale-r? They ought to, don't you think?

"Now as your tale-r will you try me?
I keep my thread and scissors by me;
The words that tell the tale completely
I pin upon the pattern neatly;
Then smitch and stitch, and lo! I cut
A tale that's simply great—all but."

The Boy ended with a laugh, but the little girl was regarding him gravely.

"You could tell stories about awfully swell people, couldn't you? The people that live on Vanna Savenue an' Paciffy Kites, an' never eat anything but cake an' ice-cream."

"Well, I've never observed that among

the people who live on Van Ness Avenue and Pacific Heights. But I'd rather tell you a story about something else. See that ship down there in the Bay, with all the white petticoats on it——"

"You mean sails," she interrupted. "She's a four-masted schooner, and her sails are very white like—like the ones that the white bird followed."

"The white bird?" he repeated. "What white bird?"

The little girl's eyes looked far beyond her visitor, out across the spreading blue of the Bay's clear waters, into immeasurable stretches; the Boy felt himself thrust aside by the remoteness of her glance.

"The white bird," she said, slowly, "that set out to search the seas for the child's father. She was a little sick child, and he used to hold her in his arms when he came home. He was a good father that talked."

"A father that talked!" repeated the Boy. "Doesn't your father talk, Bianca?"

"No, he never talks," she answered, her grave, luminous eyes meeting his, but with a half-absent gaze. "Only good-bye, when he goes away,—but he's a good father," she hastily added. "The old woman talks a heap, but he never does. This father, though, could talk to beat the cars. An' one night he talked so long an' so soft that the child fell asleep in his arms, an' he had to put her down an' go off, for the ship was waiting and her sails were spread.

"And after he was gone the child woke up and cried, because she hadn't kissed him good-bye. They told her to be still, but she couldn't; the best she could do was to try to cry without making noise, but she used to cry every night.

"And one night when the fire had burned low, and everybody had gone to bed, a white bird came out of the chimney and flew

down beside her. And he said, in chirpy talk:

"'Why are you crying?'

"The child told him all about it, and he said, 'Give me your tears. And now give me the kiss that you had for your father.'

"So the white bird took the tears under his wing and he took the kiss in his bill and started north."

"North?" The Boy was listening, curious and intent.

"Sure. To the big white world that's in the north. That's where the father's ship had gone, beating against the wind; it was such a strong wind that the white bird was blown back again and again, many miles and many days. His wings grew tired, and he had to stop very often to rest, but he kept the tears and he kept the kiss, and after every little rest he flew on, always keeping to the north.

"One day he found himself flying into a

whacking big storm; all the winds in the world seemed to be tangled up and sweeping over the ocean. He couldn't fly around such a big storm; he wouldn't go back; he had to fly through it.

"The winds beat him down, and the rains tried to drown him, and the big waves reached up to swallow him, but he kept on until he was nearly worn out. His poor wet wings could hardly flap any more, especially the left one, where he had tucked the tears."

The Boy's lips parted to ask a question, but Bianca was not looking at him.

"All suddenly," she went on, "a rainbow came dancing out of the sky, and the wind and the sea stopped fighting and quieted down, growling a little bit, but not enough to frighten the white bird. He drifted down to rest on a long, smooth wave, and a tiny silver fish hopped up to say good-morning.

"'Good-morning,' said the white bird,

very weakly, for he was tired. The little fish noticed it in a moment, and he said:

"'What's the matter, White Bird?'

"The white bird told him all about it, and how tired he was and everything, and the little fish said:

"'Poor White Bird! Let me help you. Take a blue thread from the rainbow and string the tears on it; then drop one end to me and I'll draw you along.'

"So the white bird strung the tears on the rainbow, and he tossed one end to the little silver fish, and true enough, the fish caught it in his mouth and swam along, so that the white bird didn't have to flap his poor tired wings;—just held them level and sailed along. On they went until they came to the great white north, and there they found the father and the ship.

"The storm had broken the masts and carried away the sails; the snow and the ice

shut her in, and no one knew how to find the channel to sea again.

"The white bird perched on the broken mast and looked about. None of the men noticed him; they had grown tired of waiting for help. Down in the cabin the father sat with his charts spread out about him, but he was tired and had fallen asleep. Very softly the white bird flew down to him and put the kiss on his mouth.

"He woke up calling the child's name, and opened his eyes just in time to see the white bird dart out at the doorway. Then he ran up on deck.

"'Come,' he said to the other men. 'The white bird flying aloft will lead us to the sea!'

"He didn't say why he thought so, but of course that was the magic of the kiss and the love in it.

"But it was true. The white bird was still keeping hold of the rainbow chain of

tears, and the silver fish swam out to sea, leading the ship to deep water. The men fixed up the rigging, and they had fair winds all the way as they followed the white bird home."

"But, Bianca, how did the white bird——"

The Boy's voice seemed to recall her from a great distance. She gave a violent start and looked up at him, her face scarlet.

"Jee-rusalem! I didn't mean to tell *you* a story," she said. "I tell 'em to our own kids an' the kids on the hill, but I never could tell stories to *you*."

"Well, you've done it," declared the Boy, "but what I want to know is——"

"But you were going to tell *me* a story," protested Bianca.

"And hasn't he told it?" came a big voice, and Dr. Burchard stood in the doorway.

"Well, no, not exactly, Dad," answered the Boy.

He was still somewhat dazed by the turn events had taken, and even after the doctor had finished his work and had helped his son up to the motor-car the Boy was uncertain as to just how it had come about that Bianca had told the story and not he. She was a queer little body, a most puzzling sprite, and he wondered where she had gathered the elements that made up her story. Instinct and inheritance might explain her language; some of the phrases might be but echoes of tales told or read to her; but the lift of her mind, the curious withdrawal from the material details of her surroundings,—these were not so easy to explain. Before reaching home he had made the doctor promise that he should be allowed to come again to see this little Whimsy Girl.

CHAPTER III

THE CROOKED MOON SPRITE

"SPIKE MCGINTY, if y' don't sit quiet on the foot o' that bed y' can't stay," pronounced Bianca from her pillowed throne of authority. "An' if Johnny Steinhauer wants t' stay he'll have t' sit on the floor—an' if he goes he'll take the baby," she further decreed.

John Steinhauer, a tow-headed lad of eleven, promptly sidled down to the floor, after an apprehensive glance at the fat Steinhauer baby, placidly sleeping beside Bianca in her bed.

"An' you two Dago kids——" The two little girls on the side of the bed looked up with swift appeal. "Well, you can stay where you are," said Bianca, relenting, "only you move a little farther, Giovanna. Anina

isn't as heavy as you are." Obediently they shifted, a harsh word of protest from the Italian Giovanna swiftly silenced by a low rebuke from Anina, the soft-voiced Sicilian girl, who sat quietly knitting lace.

Outside the languorous sunshine shed its mellow warmth, and the faint breeze wafted it into the room in delicious waves. Bianca's pet chicken, free to ramble in and out of the house at will, picked at the tender green weeds growing in the chinks of the doorstep, and her thin kitten purred as it lay cuddled at her feet. The Steinhauer baby slept serenely, untroubled by the fact that a new baby had deposed him and now ruled in the home over which he had been king for something more than a year.

Bianca's slim fingers were busily working over the buttonholes of a queer looking garment that faintly suggested having once been white.

"I wish some one on this hill 'd get a

new baby coat," she presently observed. "Last time the Grassos had it, an' they sewed the Italian flag to the sleeve for Domencino's christening, an' they didn't take it off when they washed it, an' now look at it!" Rainbow streaks of blue and green and red trailed over its lengths, and the little group studied it silently, keenly aware that this meant a grievous injury to the property of the community. "Now when the Reillys had it, they kep' it for nearly a year, an' they didn't get it half as stained up as this. Why doesn't your Aunt Lena buy a new one for the new baby, Johnny?" But even as Bianca asked, her thin cheek flushed with the boldness of the idea.

"Tante Lena she get married soon on——" began Johnny, and then the derisive grin on Spike McGinty's face shook him out of his dialect. "She's goin' to be married," he briskly amended, "an' o' course she'll have to spend her money on herself."

"Goin' to be married!" rejoined Bianca, with true feminine interest in this bit of gossip. "Not to that Jew peddler, I hope."

"No, no; she marry Fritz Kleinman," informed Johnny.

"Oh, yes." Bianca's flashing teeth showed in her approving smile. "I know him. He drives the groc'ry wagon. He's a dandy feller. Often he climbs down here an' gives me a banana or a lemon. He's all right."

"He's Dutch, though," put in Spike McGinty, disparagingly.

"Well, what about it?" hotly demanded Johnny. "Ain't Dutch just as good as you?"

"Easy, kids," commanded Bianca. "Y' can't stay if y' don't be quiet," and the threat of battle dissolved. "Anyway, I ain't sure that the doctor's boy's comin' to-day. He said he'd tell me some stories, an' then

I didn't have sense enough to give him a chance; I did all the talkin' myself. An' maybe he wouldn't want to tell a story to so many kids, even though I did say y' could stay."

"I can't go," put in Johnny, "till the baby wakes up."

"An' I'd like to finish this scallop before I go," timidly suggested Anina.

"'N' I'm waitin' f'r 'Nina," added Giovanna.

"Yes, I s'pose you'll all stay," observed Bianca, with questionable cordiality. "An' of course the room isn't very much crowded, long 's our own kids stay out playin'."

"They're down by my house," offered Johnny Steinhauer. "We got a whole box abbles."

"Apples!" exclaimed Bianca, with a swift gasp. "A whole box! Oh, sure they'll stay." A flush came again into her face, and her fingers worked very fast.

"Why don't y' go get her one, Dutchy?" asked Spike McGinty, but Bianca shook her head as Johnny slowly turned to have the order confirmed.

"Maybe the old woman 'll think of bringin' me one herself," she said, with a shade of wistfulness in her tone. "An', anyway, Johnny might pick out the kind of a one that the princess ate, an' that would get me into trouble, sure." Her laugh rang out gaily, and her eyes danced with the light of a fanciful idea.

"What princess?" begged Spike McGinty, hungrily, and the other children sat hushed and waiting.

"Well, she was a princess that didn't have any mother, not any at all; not even a step one to make a bluff at being good to her. But she was a princess, all right, an' she wore satin dresses every day playing mud pies, an' a long velvet one on Saturday when she scrubbed the kitchen floor. An' she had serv-

ants, an' nurses, an' people to read to her an' amuse her, an' all the fairies of the moon were her friends, an' all the fairies in the king's garden played with her an' loved her. An' the king said that twice her weight in gold an' diamon's was not worth so much as an hour with her. He loved her very much, an' always cuddled her up beside him on his throne when 'mportant things were happening, an' he took off his crown an' rode her on his back when there wasn't anything 'mportant doing.

"But one day he had to go away, an' he was dreadfully sorry because the daughter-princess couldn't go. So he called the whole bunch of palace people, servants an' messengers an' jesters an' all, an' he told them that he was going, an' that nothing was to happen to the princess while he was away.

"An' then he went into the garden an' he called all the garden fairies an' he said:

'Guard her while her father is not here. You know how dear she is to me, an' how slow the hours will be while I am away from her.' An' all the garden fairies cried an' promised. An' that night he came in an' kissed the little princess good-night in her bed, an' then he looked up into the sky an' he called: 'Oh, fairies of the moon, I am a king, and many hearts and hands attend me, but though I am a king, I beg you to keep watch over my little daughter while I am gone.' An' the moon fairies came flying down on silver arrows, an' they promised, every one, he thought, an' he went away.

"But there was one old Crooked Moon Sprite who lived in a dark alleyway in the moon, an' she was just as horrid as the others were lovely. She had never liked the king, an' she thought that the princess had no right to live since her mother, the queen, had died, an' she was just mean enough to wish to make the king unhappy.

"So she sneaked out of her dark moon alleyway, an' tumbled down the sky wrapped in a raggedy old black cloud, an' nobody saw her. Down she came an' hid in a big tree in the king's garden."

"An' didn't any one spot her then?" eagerly demanded Spike.

But Bianca did not hear; she was too far away in the realm of fancy; too far to hear the uneven thud of a crutch on the rickety walk or to see the Boy, who glanced in at the absorbed circle and hastily withdrew so that he might not interrupt the tale. Full of her story the little girl swept on.

"The crows in the big tree scolded most awfully about her being there, but she stayed anyway. An' in the morning out came the princess, happy as could be, playing in the sunshine an' talking to the garden fairies. She came dancing along, an' the Crooked Moon Sprite shook the big tree, making believe that she was a wind, an' tossed a cherry

down at the child's feet. The princess laughed an' stooped to pick it up, but a little dumb fairy was watching, an' he snatched it up before the princess could reach it. He couldn't speak to tell her, but he knew that the cherry was magicked an' that it would hurt her. The Crooked Moon Sprite was angry, an' she threw a plum at him an' knocked him down. He rolled over an' over, an' before he could get up that dreadful Crooked Moon Sprite threw down an apple, —a big, lovely one, with a red side an' a green side, an' the princess ran quickly an' took a bite out of the red side of it.

"An' what do you think happened? It changed her into a mouse!

"The poor little thing ran indoors squealing for her nurse, for of course she had no princess voice any more. But the nurse screamed an' got up on a chair, an' the more the princess squealed, the louder the nurse yelled.

"A maid came running in, an' the mouse-princess ran up on her sleeve, but the maid was frightened, too, an' beat down the mouse with her hands, never dreaming that she was beating her own dear princess.

"Then the princess ran out into the hall, an' the maid an' the nurse followed, calling to the sweeping boy, 'Kill that mouse! Kill that mouse!' An' he chased her with his broom.

"She got out of the house an' into the stable, but a big cat sprang out to eat her, an' she ran back to the house again an' went into the king's library.

"One of the king's wise men was there writing letters, an' the little princess thought that he would surely know her, but when she went up to him an' began to speak in her tiny mouse voice he jumped an' threw the poker at her. She got out of the way just in time an' ran up on top of a bookcase. Then he put his spectacles back on his nose

an' looked about; he couldn't see the mouse, so he thought she was gone, an' he sat down to his letters again.

"But pretty soon he was interrupted. There was a great crying through the house. 'Where is the princess? Where is the princess? The princess is lost!' An' out in the garden the fairies were crying: 'Who is to tell the king? Oh, where is the princess?'

"He went out into the hall, and there they were, nurses and cooks an' other useful things, all in a bunch an' crying: 'Where is the princess?'

"An' while they were crying an' searching, in walked the king."

"I'll bet there was a rough-house then!" interjected Spike.

"An' just behind the king," went on Bianca, ignoring him, "limped the little dumb fairy—only he wasn't dumb any more. He had been around the world to the palace

of the fairy queen to ask her to give him a tongue so that he might save the princess, and on his way back he had met the king and had told him the whole story.

"'The princess is lost, your majesty,' said one of the nurses, an' the others howled.

"'And there's a mouse in the library, your majesty, and I'm afraid it will nibble your majesty's books,' said the wise man.

"The king pushed him aside.

"'Stupid wise man!' he said. 'Don't you know that the mouse is our princess?'

"He went to the library door and called: 'Little daughter! Little princess!'

"The little mouse came scampering down an' cuddled in his hand. 'Look at her eyes,' said the king. 'Do you suppose that any mouse has eyes like hers?'

"An' they looked an' they could see that the mouse had the eyes of the princess.

"'Make way there!' called the king, an' the dumb fairy that wasn't dumb any more came limping in, carrying the apple.

"'Here, Princess Honey-heart!' said the king, an' the tiny mouse nibbled a bite out of the green side of the apple, an' changed back again into their own dear princess.

"There was a shout of joy from the crowd, and the king kissed her an' kissed her. But he soon put on his frown again, an' he said: 'Now to settle with the Crooked Moon Sprite,' an' he went out into the garden.

"It wasn't night yet, so she couldn't get back to her dark moon alleyway, an' she was all curled up, hiding in her raggedy black cloud, but the king found her. He lifted her out of the tree an' held her up by two fingers.

"'Now,' he said, 'we'll see how *you* like red apple.' An' though she struggled an' cried an' tried to bite, he made her swallow a piece of the red side of the apple, an' she

turned into a mouse, scampering crazily about in his hand.

"Every one thought it was good enough for her—all but the princess.

"'Oh, Daddy-King,' she said, 'hold her! Don't put her down! The cats will chase her an' the maids will beat her, an' the sweeping boy will drive her out with his broom!'

"'But she ought to be punished,' said the king. 'She turned you into a mouse, and she ought to be one for a while.'

"'Then let her be a white mouse,' the princess begged, 'an' I'll keep her in a cage an' feed her, an' when she's very, very sorry, we'll let her have a bite of the green side of the apple an' turn back to herself again.'

"An' so they did," finished Bianca, returning from the remote wilds of fancy and smiling upon her audience.

"Wow, but she was easy," scoffed Spike.

"She wasn't either!" warmly retorted Bianca.

"Of course she wasn't," agreed the Boy, strolling in.

Bianca's cheek flamed and was pale again.

"When—when did you come?" she faltered.

"When you had this little bunch so hypnotised that none of you heard me," airily rejoined the Boy. "We were all under your spell. Going to do any more to-day, Witchie?" He settled himself on the side of the bed, whence the small girls had fled at his approach. Spike McGinty was sidling out at the door, and signalling to Johnny Steinhauer.

"I gotta wait for mine baby," explained Johnny, but "mine baby" was already sitting up, rubbing his eyes with his fat fists.

"I t'ink it's time for his boddle already," muttered Johnny, and hoisted the heavy baby to his shoulder. In a lusty yell the baby expressed his resentment of the sudden shift,

and energetic cries came echoing back long after Johnny had struggled up over the rough path and beyond the Boy's amused gaze.

"No wonder the kids on the hill like to loaf around here, you little spell-binder," said the Boy, leaning on his crutch as he looked at Bianca.

She remained silent and painfully embarrassed, her eyes down, her fingers working fast.

"My laurels are as the dried corn husks of an old tamale beside yours,—to localise a metaphor," said the Boy.

"To—to paralyse a semaphore?" echoed Bianca, uncertainly.

"Not quite," said the Boy, and he laughed. "But as a wandering bard, I thought I might be not without honour here. And behold, a simple maid tells a tale that makes my mightiest effort—— Where did you learn to tell stories, Bianca?"

"Why, I—I—don't tell 'em very much——"

"Oh, come now, Scheherezade——"

"That ain't my name."

"No, but it's the name of a lady who once told stories with some success——"

"Stories!" came the doctor's voice at the door. "Isn't this story meeting yet adjourned?"

"For the present, yes," answered the Boy. "But we'll call another very soon, won't we, Witchie?"

Bianca did not answer, but she laid her hand in the clasp of the Boy's long fingers and smiled at him.

"Dad," said the Boy, as they went up the slope from the cottage, "isn't there some way to get that little girl out of here when you've made her well?—put her somewhere to get an education,—a good one?"

"Why, really, Boy, I don't know. Do you suppose she'd want an education, or

appreciate it? She's a bright child, but—— Of course I haven't ever thought of it."

But the Boy had plunged into a maze of possibilities, and he sat silent, thinking very hard, all the way home.

CHAPTER IV

THE SEA TYKES

AGAIN the quiet of a warm spring afternoon enveloped the tiny house on the cliff. Languid with the sweetness of it, the Boy, a formal caller, sat upon the only chair in the house, bracing its four uncertain legs against the latched-open door.

"It's a whacking good idea to keep this door open, Witchie, isn't it?" he observed, looking out upon the Bay panorama, shifting and changing in new and beautiful combinations before his eyes.

"Bet it is," she replied, "but the doctor had a fierce time with the old woman to make her stop shutting it."

"They didn't keep it closed before he came, did they?"

"Sure they did."

"A room like this,—with no ventilation—with only one door and no window——"

"Window? What's a window?"

"What's a window?" The Boy looked at her blankly, and then he remembered. The child had spent all her life in this one room, and she had never seen a window. But she was full of surprises like this; many of the common things of life were unknown to her, and yet her thought and experience sometimes touched topics that the Boy had not encountered. "A window, Witchie," he explained, "is—is a sort of frame filled in with panes of glass——" and then the flash of a sudden inspiration made his words halt.

"Oh, yes; I've seen 'em in books," said Bianca. "Sort of a lot of little picture frames all stuck together in a bunch. I forgot that people had 'em in houses. Haven't we got one in our other room?"

The Boy peered uncertainly into the du-

bious shadows of the castle's other apartment, but he forbore to investigate.

"Well, anyway," resumed Bianca, "the doctor wants the door open an' he said so to my father, an' now it stays open 'most all day. It's open even when it rains, sometimes, and then I lie here and look at the cross little waves fighting down in the Bay."

She laughed softly at the recollection, but the Boy had gone back to his flash of inspiration and he was mentally taking measure of the southeast wall of the room and estimating its possibilities. The silence of the soft spring day was unbroken until a butterfly hesitated at the door, hovering there on wavering wings. The Boy sat forward and addressed it:

"Rash and foolish butterfly,
Pause not here, but hasten by;
Here a witch resides, and you
In her cauldron she would stew;
Or she'd cook you in a pie,
Reckless, silly butterfly!"

Again Bianca laughed. "He won't believe you," she said. "He knows better. Lots of butterflies come in here." And as though in proof of her assertion the butterfly fluttered into the room. "Sometimes birds come. Once I kept one for three days, and then he got tired of living in a paper bag, so he ate his way out and flew off."

"But how did you catch him?" asked the Boy.

"Like this." And lifting her hands high, she closed them over the butterfly.

"Oh, Witchie!" The Boy started up in protest, but the little girl smiled and released her prisoner, unharmed and unalarmed.

"He knows that I wouldn't hurt him," she said. "Now if I happened to be one of the other kids——"

"By the way, Witchie," interrupted the Boy, "I don't often see the other kids.

You're as much alone in this house of yours as—well, as Mrs. Hallowell is in hers."

"Mrs. what?"

"Oh, a friend of mine. A very small lady in a very big house. And you're a very small lady in a not very big house. But how does it happen that the others are not here when I come?"

"You don't come at grub times," serenely explained Bianca. "When it's time to feed 'em you bet those kids are Johnny on the spot. But soon 's they're not hungry they get out an' play;—spill 'emselves all over the hill. That's what it is to be husky an' strong; they're not like me."

The Boy studied her with quick sympathy, but there was no self-pity in the little girl's face. A whimsical thought had hold of her, and the stars of the firmament of her world of fancy were sparkling in her eyes.

"Would you be spilling all over the hill,

—playing with the other kids if you were well, Witchie?" he asked.

"Me? Not much!" was the quick reply. "I'd skid right down the bluff, down through Hooligans' cabbage garden, an' past the places I can't see, right down to the wharf, to play in the water with the Sea Tykes."

"The Sea Tykes?"

Bianca laughed.

"Oh, you don't know 'em, but I've often watched them from here havin' fun down there in the Bay. They do the worst things!"

"What are they like?"

"Like—like—well, they're just tykes;—thin ones, mostly, though some are fat. They don't belong in the Bay; they come in from the Heads when they can play hookey from school."

"Oh, they go to school?"

"Yes." Bianca's tone was rich with enjoyment. "There's a fat walrus out by the

Seal Rocks that teaches them, an' that poor old walrus certainly does have a hard time. She used to live up North, but she thought she was delicate because she weighed only sixteen hundred pounds, so she came down the coast for her health. An' she feels so sorry for the iceberg walruses that didn't come down with her that she spends most of her time, even when she's teaching the Sea Tykes, knitting grey woollen petticoats for the walruses at the North Pole.

"But every time she gets 'em pretty well ahead an' has a good big pile of 'em tucked away under the Seal Rocks, the naughty Sea Tykes steal 'em, an' they ravel 'em all into wool an' run into the Bay with 'em. The sea gulls help, an' they catch the ends that the Sea Tykes throw up to them, an' pretty soon the air all over the Bay is full of fine grey wool. The sea gulls pull it with their bills, an' the Sea Tykes fray it with their long, thin fingers, an' it's so fine you can't

get a thread of it, but it hides everything,—rocks an' islan's, an' lights, an' ferry boats, an' the fog whistles blow an' the sea gulls scream, an' the Sea Tykes laugh, and the walrus at the Seal Rocks gets so cross that she strikes out at everything with her tusks." Bianca lost her breath in the haste of her recital, but she caught it again with a laughing gasp. "Sometimes she really does damage," she resumed, and a shadow lay for a moment on her face, "for she strikes the boats that try to get past her. People don't know what makes her cross; maybe they don't know that she's there at all.

"An' then the Sea Tykes usually get sorry, an' anyway it makes them nervous to hear the fog whistles blowing, so they get out their seaweed brooms an' soon the Bay is clear again."

"So that's the way the much reviled fog gets into our Bay, is it?" asked the Boy.

"Not always," Bianca explained. "That's

only the thick, grey, woolly kind. But you know there's another kind—thin, silk fog, all dampish in the middle. That spills down from the moon where the Moon Lady sits an' strings beads on grey silk thread; tiny little beads that look like wet glass; you've seen them? "

The Boy nodded. They were very like wet glass beads, those crystal globules that clung to his coat on foggy mornings.

" She wants a dress all covered with beads like the one the lady has in the circus picture, an' she has been stringing them for years. But every time she gets a good start, out marches the Moon Chief——"

" The what? "

" The Moon Chief—boss o' the moon, you know. He's all dressed in the silver stuff they wrap yeast cakes in, an' he has a belt that looks like the band of a cigar, an' he carries a banner that says on it that he's the Moon Chief an' that every one must obey

him. An' he simply won't let the Moon Lady have the dress of beads; he always takes it away an' throws it down into the water. The poor Moon Lady cries an' cries, an' that's what makes the beads so wet.

"The Sea Tykes just love it when the silky wet fog comes down, an' they dash about the Bay an' bump the noses of little boats together, an' they tangle the fishermen's nets, an' they splash water on the lights of the big ships, trying to put them out.

"The bells keep ringing in the fog at the ferry slips an' at Mile Rock an' the fort, an' the walrus school teacher rings *her* bell loudest of all, but the Sea Tykes don't pay any 'tention. They just frolic around as long 's they dare, an' then they gather up all the fog beads,—millions of 'em—an' roll 'em into bundles under the water, an' they take them out an' give 'em to the mermaids at the Farallone Islands."

"Then they're good friends with the mermaids," observed the Boy.

"Pretty good friends, but Sea Tykes can't be very good, ever. No mermaid dares to go to sleep while the Sea Tykes are out of school; they would tie her to a rock with seaweed ropes or tangle her hair all up or do something else to tease her. But they're good to the mermaids most of the time.

"They do other naughty things, though. Once in a while some very 'sclusive party of fishes comes into the Bay, an' if that old walrus school teacher isn't watching out pretty sharp the Sea Tykes get away again, an' they dive down, an' each one catches a 'sclusive fish by its 'sclusive tail an' holds it down hard to the floor of the Bay. Instead of sailing stylishly in the fish has to walk, an' the Sea Tykes' long legs stretch up through the water, an' the Sea Tykes' naughty heels kick the whole top of the Bay into white bubbles, an' the people say: 'Look

at the white caps. Must be cold on the water to-day.'

"Out on the beach they tease the children who go wading. They steal the shoes left on the sand an' run away with them out into the water; they'll steal hats or anything, an' think it a big joke. An' it's heaps of fun for them to trip up a child an' make her sit down all of a floppy sudden an' get wet. An' sometimes they gather up the cross, hungry little crabs from under the rocks an' set 'em on the beach to bite toes.

"But they do worse things than that. They get out there just at the tide rip,—you can see it, but I can't—an' they cut the nets an' let the fish out, an' there's nothing to sell when the fisherman comes in at the wharf."

"But, Witchie, how do you know about the beach and the fort and—and all those things? You've never seen them."

"You don't have to see things to know

'em," she answered, easily. "The kids tell me about lots o' things."

"But the tide rip, and the broken nets——"

Her face grew sharp and tense, and lines of past anxiety outlined its seriousness.

"If all the things you had to eat were paid for with the fish that come out o' the Bay—or put on the bill if the fish didn't come—you'd get to know those things, too. Don't y' think y' would?"

"Of course I would," agreed the Boy in quick concern. "And of course you know because your father's a fisherman. Did he tell you about the Sea Tykes?"

"No. He used to talk about things, but now there 're too many kids around, an' they're noisy. He has to stay out a good deal on the water, too, an' he's pretty tired when he gets in."

Her worried little face distressed the Boy, and he rose and came over to her.

"You'll have to do the talking for him, Witchie. Suppose you tell him about the Sea Tykes. Let me see if I could draw one for you; maybe I could if you'd make some suggestions."

On the cover of a pasteboard box he drew a quaint figure with seaweed legs and arms, and a queer head that might have been made of a bit of floating coral.

"There! Does that look anything like it?" he demanded of Bianca, who watched him with eyes enchanted.

"That's great," she breathed, intent on the finishing strokes. "'R' you goin' to let me keep him?"

"He's yours," said the Boy, "but first let me label him," and he wrote under the picture:

"Not very many children like
The somewhat snippy name of tyke;
But oh, suppose you had to be
The kind of tyke that's in the sea?
Oh, wow!
Oh, whee!
The cold, damp, chilly, splashy sea!

"They never dare to come ashore,
Even to scan the baseball score;
They race with sturgeon, shad or pike,
Or any friendly fish they strike;
And hike?
Sure, Mike!
But who would be a deep sea tyke?"

Bianca was crowing with delight over this production when the doctor came in upon them, and she flashed laughing messages to the Boy all the time that she was being put through her wearisome and painful routine.

"Lots of pluck, hasn't she, Boy?" said the doctor as they went away. "She's as game as an old soldier."

The Boy assented, but his thought was wandering. "Funny little Whimsy Girl!" he said to himself, and aloud: "Dad, we'll have to do something for her. Wonder if Mrs. Hallowell wouldn't help? I'm going to ask her."

CHAPTER V

THE BOY PLANS A GIFT

BIANCA was not expecting the Boy when he arrived next morning. He had heretofore come in the afternoon, but it was not more than nine o'clock when he reached the cottage, the weight of a serious purpose bending his young brows, and his merry whistle gathered into a business-like pucker. He stopped at the soap-box doorstep, and Bianca's light voice floated out to him.

"Can't you sit just a little stiller—'thout wiggling so much, Tonia?" she was coaxing.

The Boy looked in.

Tonia, a small, ragged half-sister, was perched on a box drawn close to Bianca's bed, and the little patient was busily smoothing out the snarls in the child's matted brown hair.

"'T won't take more than a few minutes, Tonia," the Whimsy Girl was saying, and then she looked up and caught sight of the Boy.

"Why, what—'tisn't time for the doctor, is it?" she demanded.

"Oh, no," the Boy reassured her. "It really isn't time for me—for my usual call, I mean. But at this moment I'm here on a secret mission."

"I thought it couldn't be time for the doctor," remarked the child, "'nless the day was standin' on its head."

"Standing on its head!" echoed the Boy. "That's a funny notion.

> "Suppose 'twere eight before 'twas seven;
> Suppose 'twere twelve before eleven;
> Suppose 'twere nine before 'twas eight,
> Poor little *one* would have to wait
> Until the bunch had all passed by
> Before she'd dare pipe up: 'Here's I!'"

Bianca laughed, but small Tonia shrank

back in scowling, unfriendly shyness, and tried to escape from the box where she sat, a prisoner.

"Now, Tonia, you can't go," protested Bianca. "Not till you get these boat-lashin's out o' your hair."

The Boy instantly perceived and understood the child's shyness.

"I'm not going to stay, you know—that is, not now," he hurriedly explained. "I'll have to have my secret mission well established before the doctor gets through with his hospital work and needs the automobile, and that may mean two or three trips up and down the hill. And before I really begin, I must consult the authorities. Where's your mother, Witchie?"

"At Steinhauer's," answered the little girl. "She has to go there early to dress the baby an'——"

But the Boy was gone, making brisk progress on his crutches, his eager step elo-

quent of his interest in the business in hand. Bianca resumed her task.

"I know you hate to have your hair combed, Tonia," she said, "but you'd rather have it hurt a little now than let the Googlewinks get hold of it, wouldn't you?"

"Whath Googlewinkth?" demanded the child, fixing her solemn gaze on Bianca.

"Googlewinks are—well, they're just Googlewinks; funny things, sort o' birds an' sort o' fairies; an' they're always lookin' for tangled-up hair to live in," blandly explained Bianca.

"Once there was a little girl who wouldn't have her hair combed; she cried an' pulled away, an' did lots of naughty things, so that no one could get the snarly snarls out of her hair.

"But one night the Googlewinks came,—hundreds of 'em,—an' they took all her tangled hair, an' they made swings of it, an' they twisted it into hammocks, an' they

spliced threads of it together for skipping ropes, an' some of them played Christmas tree an' they sqwuzzled it all out into branches an' hung little dangling things on it. An' all this pulling an' twisting an' tying hurt the little girl a great deal more than just having her hair combed nice an' smooth an' her sister's ribbon tied on it," she finished beguilingly.

"Moral: Don't cater to the Google-winks!" pronounced the Boy, standing smiling at the door, but he retreated instantly in obedience to the protest of Bianca's lifted eyebrows.

Outside of the house he busied himself with a two-foot rule and a pencil taking measurements along the southeast wall, the business-like pucker again suppressing his whistle. He could hear Bianca within, still cajoling the reluctant Tonia.

"An' once," she was saying, "there was a good little girl an' she never made any fuss

about having her hair combed. It was always soft an' shiny an' smooth, an' the Swishy-softs an' the Shiny-ohs just loved her. The Swishy-softs are the breeze fairies, an' the Shiny-ohs are the fairies of the sun. The Shiny-ohs made her pretty hair all goldy at the ends, an' the Swishy-softs played little tunes on it, blowing the hairs out like the strings of a harp. So the little girl was always happy, because her hair was beautiful an' because everywhere she went she heard lovely music playing. Now you run along," she finished. "The Googlewinks won't get you this time, Tonia."

The small girl scrambled down from her box and darted away, brushing past the Boy as he came in at the door.

"That's something of a stunt," remarked the Boy, "tying a kid up with a story when you want to keep it quiet. You have family enough to give you plenty of practice, too, haven't you, Witchie?"

Bianca's face reddened.

"Sometimes I have to tell 'em stories; it's the only way," she argued. "But the old woman says it's all lies, an' she wishes I'd quit."

"Quit!" echoed the Boy in astonishment. "The lady hasn't much appreciation for the force and value of fiction, has she?"

"I suppose not," agreed the little girl. "But the kids love it. Tonia begs every night for the story of the Cloud Doll."

The Boy stood for a moment in interrogative silence, and she went on:

"It begins about the Doll That Nobody Wanted. Of course there couldn't really be such a doll,—a doll that nobody would want, but this was only make-believe. An' there was another doll, one that everybody wanted, only nobody could keep her because she wouldn't stay. If you put her in the drawer she was gone when you went to get her, an' if you put her in the bed, she'd slip out from

the covers an' hide somewhere else; an' she never stayed in her box a minute. So she kept everybody pretty busy just looking for her, an' they were always terribly excited about her, an' couldn't guess why she was so different. But the reason was that she was a Cloud Doll, an' Cloud Dolls can do more things than some fairies.

"One night the Doll That Nobody Wanted was lying awake crying, an' the Cloud Doll lifted up her head an' said: 'Hoo-oo!'

"The Doll That Nobody Wanted was very much astonished, an' she said: 'Oh, is that you? I saw them putting you over in the drawer.'

"'Well, I'm not there now,' said the Cloud Doll. 'I'm on the saucepan shelf.'

"An', sure enough, she was.

"'How do you get so far away from where they put you?' asked the Doll That Nobody Wanted. 'I don't understand.'

"The Cloud Doll laughed and said: 'Of

course you don't. But I'm going farther away than this, an' if you like I'll take you with me. You're not very happy here, are you?'

"'No, I'm not,' said the Doll That Nobody Wanted. 'But where are you going?'

"'To my home in the clouds,' answered the Cloud Doll. 'Come. Are you ready to start?'

"The Cloud Doll took the other doll's hands an' they ran to the door; then the Cloud Doll jumped up an' began to splash her legs about just as if she were swimming, an' the Doll That Nobody Wanted did the same thing, an' up they went, up, up, up! An' it was true. The Cloud Doll did live on a cloud;—on the top side of a beautiful pink one. Just as they got below it a million dolls poked their heads over the edge to see who was coming, an' they shouted: 'It's Prankie!'—for she was the most mischievous of the cloud dolls. They came crowding to

meet her, an' they said: 'Who's with you?' But Prankie only said: 'Oh, a friend of mine.' She didn't want to say: 'It's a doll that nobody wants,' because that would hurt the other doll's feelings, an' besides it wasn't true any more. As soon as the other doll stepped up on the cloud, everybody wanted her. They thought she was darling, an' they kept telling her so. They took her to the Doll Queen's palace, an' to the room where they keep the baby dolls, an' into the kitchen where the dolls cook an' wash the dishes. An' away off at the other end of the cloud was a tiny town where all the tiny dolls lived; none of them any longer than that," and Bianca measured off about six inches. "It was a lovely place; the tiny dolls had tiny dogs as little as a pickle, an' kittens as little as a peanut, an' chickens about the size of red beans. The Doll That Nobody Wanted was delighted with everything, an' all the tiny dolls began to whisper together, an' one

of them said: 'Couldn't you stay here an' take care of us for always?'

"She was very much surprised, an' she asked them: 'Do the dolls really want me?' An' they all began to shout: 'Want you! Why, everybody wants you!' An' so she stayed, an'—— An' I'm talking to you, an' you're not supposed to be here at all, are you?"

"No, I'm not, Miss Whimsy," replied the Boy, starting to his feet. "I have the royal permission of your mother to proceed with my labours, and instead, here I am listening to your tales."

"But what are you going to do?"

The Boy screwed up his eyes in a quizzical wink.

"I'm planning a present for a captive princess," he said. "And what do you think I want to give her?"

"I don't know." Bianca's reply was breathless and eager.

"I'm going to give her a proprietary interest in the southeastern end of the world," he solemnly confided, and rising, he again surveyed the southeast wall.

"Can't you tell me what you're going to do?" she coaxed.

"Yes, in a way," he answered. "I'm planning to put a picture here;—a moving picture. You've never seen one——"

"No, but I've heard of them. Can you truly make one?" she demanded.

"You'd like it, wouldn't you, Witchie? Instead of a blank wall facing your bed, you'd like a picture that would change every hour of the day, and even at night, under favourable conditions, give you visions of star-set skies and melancholy moonlight?"

The little girl was speechless with the wonder of the suggestion, and the Boy laughed as he swung across the room on his crutches. He stopped at the door with a flash of his accustomed nonsense:

"A wizard who is truly wizzy
May talk hot air, but he gets busy;
So now if wonders you would see,
Just keep your weather eye on me."

He was out at the doorway as he spoke, hastening away beyond range of her "weather eye." Twice he came back, alert, full of mystery, stopping only to drop a crumb of nonsense to her, and the child was strained and white with puzzled excitement when he came up the hill on a third trip.

This time he was not alone. Bianca heard him giving directions to some one outside to lift something carefully, to put it down in a spot indicated, and then to wait a minute. She was leaning up on her pillow, breathlessly watching for him when he came in, and the Boy cried out at sight of her.

"Oh, Witchie!" he said. "I shouldn't have tried to get you on a string like this! You little bunch of nerves, what am I going to do with you?"

He put her back gently and smoothed her

pillow before taking his usual seat on the side of her bed.

"Now I'll tell you the whole secret," he said, speaking quietly in an effort to soothe her. "I'm going to put a window in that wall for you. I talked it over with the doctor, and I talked it at your mother and knocked her out with the boldness of the scheme. Then I talked it to three carpenters who said it couldn't be done, and finally to one amiable, long-headed Swede who said it could. He's outside now with a helper. The window's all made, and the only thing we have to do is to put it in. You'll enjoy seeing them cut out part of your house and fill up the opening with glass, won't you, Witchie?"

Her thin little hand reached out for his.

"Yes,—I'll enjoy it—if you stay with me," she whispered, her eyes on the wall where the marvel was to be wrought.

"Surely I'll stay," was the Boy's hearty

rejoinder. "But you know I have to help—as much as I can," he added, with a rueful glance at his crutches.

He stepped to the door and bade the workmen begin. To the two carpenters it was a simple matter—cutting out part of a flimsy wall in a roughly-built cabin, but to Bianca, watching wide-eyed, it was a tremendous undertaking.

The Boy kept her as quiet as possible, dropping down frequently to his perch on the side of her bed, but when the first board was pulled out of the wall and thrown down, the little girl trembled so violently that the Boy was thoroughly alarmed.

"Don't look, Witchie," he begged, slipping his arm about her and pressing her face against his shoulder. "Stay quiet just as you are, and I'll tell you a story."

But even the promise of a story could not calm her leaping excitement.

"It's the same sky—over there," she whis-

pered, "but it's different, isn't it? And—oh, Boy, what do we smell?"

"Why, it's honeysuckle," replied the Boy, vigorously sniffing the fragrance in answer to her long, trembling inhalation. "A moment, now, and you can see it."

The opening was rapidly growing, and presently they could see the honeysuckle, a scented, graceful drapery over a shack not unlike Bianca's own. By what miracle the vine had grown so graciously the Boy could not imagine, for the goats of the hill, hungry nomads by day, usually devoured every scrap of growing green within their reach.

"So that's the way they grow," Bianca breathed,—"the little horns that the fairies blow. Oh, how well I'll hear them now!"

"Have you ever eaten the honey at the end of the horns, Bianca?"

"No," she severely replied. "That's put there for the fairy who blows the horn. You wouldn't eat it, would you?"

The Boy very clearly remembered having stripped many a heavily laden branch of honeysuckle for the tiny bits of sweet, but he forbore to answer.

"Look now, Bianca," he suggested, and together they gazed out through the opening, enlarged to its permanent size. "Look, and tell me how you like your new picture."

The little girl was deep in the detail of it, her hungry eyes drinking in its marvels.

"Houses and houses and houses," she was saying, straining her gaze. "One with a cap on——"

"That's an observation tower," put in the Boy.

"An' one trimmed with black lace!"

"With—— Oh, that's a wrought iron railing on the balcony."

"An' a lead-pencil one——"

"That's a church, my child."

"An' one's squeezed in between two others an' all bent out——"

"That bend happens to be a bay window, my dear."

"An' one—look—down by the water! It has a clock-box with a cornucopia on top!"

"You mean the Ferry Building and the ferry clock," explained the Boy.

"An' there's another—oh, Boy, how many hundreds of houses there are that are not on my hill at all!"

The Boy was silent. He was thinking how small a view it was, after all; just a glimpse down a narrow line of vision on the north side of the hill. Of the great city beyond, Bianca could have no conception. But narrow though the view was, it was a new universe to the child, and she was panting and white from the strain of her discoveries when Dr. Burchard arrived. At a glance the doctor measured her nervous tension, and he gently laid her down and sat beside her, banishing the Boy with a look that was stern and disapproving.

The work of fitting in the window was nearly completed, and as soon as the men had finished the doctor rose and covered up the new window with a discarded bed-quilt.

"To-morrow, Bianca," he said, answering the disappointment in her nervous little face. "The window's yours, but you can't have it any more this evening."

Bianca's appealing dark eyes turned to the Boy, who had come in after having helped the men finish the work, but he recognised the fact that he had over-estimated her strength and had put her under a heavy strain. Very meekly he accepted the doctor's unspoken rebuke, and he slipped away with only a whispered good-bye.

CHAPTER VI

THROUGH THE MAGIC PANE

VERY much subdued and not at all sure as to how he should find the Whimsy Girl, the Boy made his way to her door the next afternoon. There was no sound from within, and his anxiety deepened, only to fly away on a huge breath of relief as he took the final step and looked in.

She was lying, relaxed and rested, her gaze on the window, and in her eyes the ecstasy of dreams. The Boy stood looking at her, touched to the heart by the depth of her quiet joy.

"Do you like it, Witchie?" he gently asked.

"Like it! Oh, Boy, I love it! When you said it was going to be a picture," she went on, "and a moving one, I thought: 'Won't

the kids on the hill have a dandy time with it!' But I wasn't all glad, because sometimes I get very tired of them; if I really had a moving picture they'd never go home—an' you know the doctor wouldn't like that."

"I'm sure he wouldn't." The Boy still wore the chastened manner of one rebuked.

"But my window!" said the little girl. "So many things happen there! This morning I saw the day come walking out of the sky. I never saw it come before. It was always there when we opened the door. But this was early—early. I woke up in the night-time—a grey sort of night-time, with just one tired-looking star trying to keep its eye open.

"Then a silver river ran along the edge of the sky, but it melted away, an' a fan of rainbows came an' spread colours all up into the grey, an' splashed out the sleepy star. An' then the rainbow fan changed to cloud curtains hanging before the day's door,

—red an' gold an' pale yellow, an' then white an' pink, an' one by one they fell down, an' she came."

Her voice trailed down to a whisper, and she lay breathing deep, hushed by the remembered glory of her first sunrise. The Boy waited, in reverent silence.

"Boy," she said, presently, "God does very wonderful things with His sea and His sky——"

"And His people," the Boy added.

Her grave, dark eyes looked up at him.

"You're one of them," she said.

"And so are you, Witchie." The Boy's smile was very tender.

She drew a little happy sigh.

"Yes," she said, "I know. I used to think that God had forgotten all about me, lying here so long, but I haven't thought so at all since you came."

The Boy rose and went to the window, touched and embarrassed.

"Why, Witchie," he said, "I haven't begun to do things for you yet. This window——"

"Oh, the window!" She caught the word in a crow of delight. "Everything passes by it,—dogs an' chickens an' goats an' children,—lots of 'em that never come near my door. An' it's so funny to look at the outside of houses."

The Boy stared, and then he again remembered. Bianca had never before seen the outside of any house, not even her own. Once more he felt a surge of pity for the little shut-away child, but he carried it off lightly.

"Would you like an X-ray attachment to your window, Bianca, so that you could see the *inside* of houses through it?"

Bianca gravely considered the suggestion.

"No,—I don't care to see the inside of every house,—but I'd like to see Jimmy Reilly putting his turkey to bed."

"He doesn't really put the turkey to bed, does he?" the Boy demanded.

"Well, the bed's a roost in the woodshed, of course," Bianca explained. "But Jimmy buttons the turkey up in a jacket an' ties two strings to the buttons so that the turkey won't fall off the roost. Jimmy raised it from an egg, so he's pretty careful of it.

"Last year he wanted a turkey for Thanksgiving, an' the man in the store said forty cents a pound. So Jimmy sold bottles an' went errands an' milked two goats, an' he saved up forty cents, all by himself. Then he went down town to buy a turkey for his family;—there's eleven of the Reillys an' Jimmy had only enough money for a one-pound turkey, but he said it would have to do. He just wanted to surprise his mother. An' what do you think? There wasn't a one-pound turkey in the whole town of San Francisco!

"So this year he's raising one. Some one

gave him the egg, an' you should have seen that kid the day he was sure it was really a turkey that came out of it. He went all over the hill telling everybody. An' he's been cuddling it an' taking care of it, an' Mrs. Reilly says: 'Sure, I belave he almosht has the bashte taught t' say its prayers at noight!'"

The Boy laughed heartily at her accurate echo of Mrs. Reilly's dialect.

"Jimmy just loves him," went on the little girl, "an' that's why I sent him a valentine."

"Sent Jimmy a valentine?"

"No; the turkey."

"You wouldn't—even *you* wouldn't send a valentine to a turkey, would you, Whimsy?"

"I did." And her low laugh again bubbled into a crow. "Some of the kids had sent me one:

"'The rose is red,
The violet's blue;
Sugar is sweet
And so are you.'

"So I pasted a picture on a card an' I wrote:

"'The rose is red,
The violet's blue;
Chickens grow fat
An' so must you!'

"I sent it to Turkey Reilly, an' Jimmy pasted it up on the wall of the woodshed. It's there yet if the Reilly goat hasn't eaten it."

"I daresay it's safe enough," chaffed the Boy. "Even a goat might balk at an indigestible poem."

"You don't know the Reilly goat," declared Bianca. "He ate two geography lessons last week;—Anina's an' Johnny Steinhauer's,—an' he ate Spike McGinty's spelling, with only two words wrong out o' fifty. Often he goes down an' eats the morning newspaper off of somebody's doorstep, an' I guess he could eat Turkey Reilly's valentine if it wasn't pasted up good an' tight."

The Boy laughed and agreed, but his thoughts had taken another turn.

"Witchie," he said, "tell me where you learned to read and to write."

The little girl shrank back in blushing embarrassment.

"I don't really—read, you know," she confessed, "only pictures an'—an' easy words. I can talk a lot of words that I can't read. I don't know when I began to learn," she went on, reflectively, "but the kids often bring their home work here, an' I learn it with them. I can write better than any of them; better even than Spike," she finished, her embarrassment giving way to a glow of pardonable pride.

"But how did you know about fairies?" pursued the Boy.

Bianca looked at him with a blank stare.

"Know about fairies?" she repeated. "Why,—I've always known about them; I —think—I have." Her voice slowed up un-

certainly. "I don't remember when I didn't know about fairies. Oh, they've helped me a great deal when I've been lying here alone. Once I found a fairy in a rain-drop that dripped over the door; he was a funny little fellow with a red sweater an' a red cap; he just fitted nicely inside of the raindrop, holding on to the door frame with one tiny hand. So I made him into a story and told it to the kids when they came in.

"An' once when the wind blew down the chimney an' scattered the soot an' ashes from the fire, I could see the funniest little black fellows, each riding a soot balloon through the air. So I made the story of the Chimney Soot Fairy, an' the kids are always begging for that. An' I know the fairies will tell me lots of things when they go by my window. They'll all come crowding around it as soon as they know it's here."

"Why, yes," agreed the Boy. "Think of the fairies that must live in that twisted

tree down there, clinging to the edge of nothing on the cliff. Must be fairies there, don't you think so, Witchie?"

"Sure there are. That's the tree that wasn't afraid."

A question leaped to the Boy's tongue, but he waited.

"You know the trees have to be kind to the little winds," she said. "They pet them an' play with them, an' help them learn to sing; you'll always find little winds where there are trees. They keep the leaves amused an' jolly, an' that's one of the reasons why the trees are so good to them.

"But the winds are not always gentle when they grow up. Some of them are fierce an' cruel, an' they beat and bend and break the very trees that were kindest to them when they were little. The Storm Father gets very angry when they do, and he calls them in an' ties them, but sometimes he is very

busy in other places so he doesn't always know what they are doing.

"Once the cruel winds came down and attacked a lot of beautiful trees that grew here on this very hill; beat them an' tore their branches an' trampled all the baby leaves in the wet. They were so dreadfully rough that the trees bent their heads an' started to run away.

"They ran up the hill, an' at the top there was a little house. They didn't know it, but the house belonged to the Storm Father, an' when he saw them coming an' heard them crying he was very much surprised. But he was angry, too, because he thought that the trees should have been brave enough to stay where they belonged no matter what the rough winds did.

"The trees came crowding to the door, an' they cried: 'Oh, let us in! Let us in!'

"The Storm Father asked them: 'Why?'

"'Because we're afraid,' the trees answered.

"'Afraid?' said the Storm Father. 'Were you not set upon the hill to play with the little breezes and give nesting place to the birds? Go back to where you belong and stay there, no matter what happens.'

"One little tree—the one out there—went back and stayed where it belonged, but all the others kept crying: 'Oh, let us in! We're afraid!'

"'Think again!' said the Storm Father. 'Do you really wish to come in?'

"An' the trees cried louder than ever: 'Oh, yes, yes; let us in!'

"The Storm Father opened the door and the trees crowded into the house. But they didn't stand still a moment. A big fire was blazing on the hearth. The Storm Father called to it, an' it leaped out an' snatched up the trees one by one until they were all

burned up. Then the Storm Father went out and tied up the big winds and scolded them, and he patted the little tree an' straightened it up, but he's pretty rough anyway, so he didn't get it very straight, did he? But that's why there's only one tree on our hill."

"And you found all that out between yesterday and to-day, you Witchie-Whimsy!" exclaimed the Boy. He spoke in a chaffing tone, but he was again deeply stirred at the child's flight of fancy. "I don't suppose there's a secret in the universe that you won't dig out, now that you have that all-revealing window! It's no wonder I feel as though I'm Prime Minister to a witch!"

They were silent a moment, and then the Boy spoke, in a dreamy, reminiscent tone:

"Flash of wing and sway of tree,
Drift of cloud and lift of sea,
Bear your touch of witchery.

"Pendant globes of crystal rain,
Mists that veil your window pane,
Blend into your elfin strain.

"Witch, enchantress, I must flee
From your spells and sorcery;
I'm afraid you'll magic me!"

Her hand reached out for his.

"You won't, will you?" she pleaded.

"Won't what?"

"Won't—won't flee."

The Boy laughed. "Sure you won't magic me if I stay?" he teased.

"No," she promised, seriously. "I wouldn't magic you even if I could. You're just the way you ought to be—just right."

"Sensible Witchie! You couldn't improve on me, could you?" he chaffed, with a quizzical chuckle.

"No, I couldn't," she persisted. "I'd like to magic your crutches, though. I'd make 'em into a pair of stilts, so high that you

could reach the sky an' play with the twinkly stars."

"But suppose that the twinkly stars should object, and prick my fingers with their sharp points?"

"They wouldn't do that," asserted Bianca. "Never,—to *you!*"

The Boy put his hands to his head, solemnly feeling its measurements.

"I think," he pronounced, gravely, "that I can still get my head out at your doorway, but if I stay any longer I know that I shall never be able to do so.

> "I told you that you'd magic me,
> Although just how I could not see;
> But if I stay, my swelling head
> I can't take with me into bed,
> And don't you think it might feel sore
> To be left lying on the floor?"

"Oh, but you're not going, are you?" the little girl demanded in quick concern.

"Oh, but I am. Here comes the doctor,

and I know he won't let me stay any longer; he doesn't need me to help him to-day. I'll hang around at the top of the hill until he's through with you, and maybe the cool Bay breezes will undo your magic."

And with a grin and a wave of his hat the Boy was gone.

CHAPTER VII

HERALDING THE FAIRY GODMOTHER

SLOWLY Dr. Burchard's automobile made its way up the steep hill, and as usual a crowd of children accompanied it, but neither the doctor nor the Boy had eyes or ears for their retinue. They were nearing the climax of a long discussion, and the doctor was impressing the Boy with a few final points. The Boy tried to listen attentively, but his eagerness strained at its leash, and his words hurried forth at the doctor's first pause.

"I know, though, Dad, that Mrs. Hallowell will never let Bianca come back to this life after she once has her. She'll keep her, and send her to school, and——"

"Boy, Boy!" protested the doctor. "Don't go climbing rainbows! People do

not add strange children to their families in so ill-advised and promiscuous a fashion. Mrs. Hallowell agrees to take Bianca and care for her until I get her over the operation; that may mean months of devotion and hard work. Don't expect more than that."

"But when she knows Bianca—and when she sees how the poor little thing has been living——"

"When she sees——"

"Why, yes, Dad. She's coming up here to-morrow."

"Oh, she is. Well, then, she'll understand why I've backed you in your siege of her castle. She'll see the impossibility of performing the operation or of getting the child well by any treatment up here. And she knows how these people are about hospitals. But remember—I'm not standing with you in your siege of her heart."

"No need to," exulted the Boy. "When

she sees Bianca—when she gets to know her——"

The doctor's face grew very grave.

"Boy, you mustn't trade on Mrs. Hallowell's sympathies. We know that she's a tender-hearted woman, and I think we should protect her against the possibility of an impulsive mistake——"

"There couldn't be any mistake in regard to Bianca, Dad. She'll justify everything that's done for her. When you get her on her feet——"

"*When* I do," put in the doctor.

"You will," declared the Boy. "Why, Dad, you can't fail!"

The doctor shook his head grimly, but his deep-set eyes were very soft.

"There's another point we haven't taken account of, Boy," he said, after a moment. "What about the child's people—her father?"

"I've thought of that," answered the Boy,

and for a moment a shadow crossed his face. "Of course he may not be willing to give her up. And it isn't in Bianca's loyal heart to forget him. The step-mother would be glad to be relieved of her, I think,—poor little Whimsy Girl!—but I'm sure it's all right! Perhaps Bianca and her father would see more of each other, would be far better chums living apart than they are here in this crowded shack." The Boy's words were again speeding up to a crescendo of enthusiasm. "Mrs. Hallowell will have him down to see her at the Hallowell place, and Bianca can come up to see him after you get her walking and——"

"Slower, Boy, slower," warned the doctor. "You ramble on in this excited strain and make me doubt the wisdom of our whole course."

"Don't do that, Dad," begged the Boy. "I'll slow up. I'll dance to your music at any tempo you set, most worthy Piper,"

and he included the group of clamouring children in his amused glance about him. "Here's our programme, then. You're to interview the step-mother; you'll find her at Steinhauer's now, and you'll explain that Mrs. Hallowell is willing to take Bianca and care for her over the operation. She is to consult with the father, and I'm to break the news, in my most judicious manner, to the little girl. I'll be careful, Dad; I'll wait for the right moment, and I won't get excited, and I won't even suggest that Mrs. Hallowell may fall in love with my Whimsy Girl and keep her after she's well."

"If you think you can go ahead in a safe, sane manner——"

"I can, Dad, and I will. I'll be as placid as the Steinhauer baby and as unemotional as Bianca's horned toad. Please try to trust me, and don't worry."

He was out of the car as soon as it stopped, swinging along nimbly and lightly

on his crutches. The doctor alighted more slowly, looking after his son with a dubious eye, but the Boy was hastening on, uttering a series of piercing Indian calls to announce to Bianca that he was coming.

She was propped up, eagerly looking for him when he swung in at the door.

"My, but you're a noisy kid!" she exclaimed.

"Sure I am. Why do you suppose they made me yell leader? Not because I'm an expert in blowing 'the horns of elf-land,' I assure you."

"'The horns of elf-land'?" she repeated. "Do you mean the honeysuckle horns?"

"Maybe I do," said the Boy. "I should think they might come under that heading. It must take a good many horns to supply all the little people in elf-land. But there's lots of honeysuckle growing in the world; you ought to see it over the Hallowells' big

arbour." In his eagerness he almost forgot his caution, but he checked himself in time and subdued his tone to one of mystery.

"Witchie," he said, "how would you like to live for a while in a big arbour three times the size of this house of yours, with honeysuckle climbing up its tall sides and across the roof and down again——"

"The leaves spreading out as big as an umbrella, and the honeysuckle horns growing into steam sirens," she finished, with mischievous flippancy.

The Boy stared.

"I mean that, Bianca," he asserted. "The arbour is three times as big as your house, and——"

"Oh, you're kidding," she chaffed, and again the Boy had to laugh, so quaint did the phrase of the street sound in her charming voice.

"But you don't know how big the Hal-

lowell place is," he protested, groping in vain for his tactful beginning.

"I can guess," she rejoined, airily. "A good husky giant could take this hill up on a shovel, an' put it on top o' that high one across the Bay, an' then pile two or three more on top o' that. Is that how tall the Hallowell place is?" Her quaint humour was making her eyes dance, and her cheeks were very pink.

"Now *you* quit kidding," the Boy laughingly commanded. "You're positively disrespectful to-day, Witchie. I didn't say that the Hallowell place is tall; I said that it's big."

"Big as the Bay?"

"Oh, no."

"Then it can't be so much," she asserted, and her flashing smile curved roguishly at the Boy's bewilderment.

"Witchie," he said, with a somewhat discomfited laugh, "you're a most provoking

monkey to-day. Can't you be serious? Here; I'll tell you a story if you'll be quiet and listen.

"Once upon a time there was a great magician who wandered over the world looking for people who were ailing or hurt or crippled so that he might make them well again."

"Yes," put in Bianca, with a slightly bored expression. "You mean the patent medicine feller in the wagon down at the corner."

"I said he was a magician," severely explained the Boy.

"Well, so's this man. He can put an egg into a handkerchief an' take out a duck. He can put a marble into a hat an' take out an orange. Oh, he's a magician, all right. The kids on the hill all talk about him."

"Well, he isn't the kind of a magician I'm talking about," said the Boy, frankly nettled. "I'm talking about one who really

spent his time doing things for human beings. There are so many people in the world who need help, Bianca; rich ones and poor ones. One day in his travels the magician found a little sick princess up on a high mountain."

"Now how could she get up on a high mountain if she was sick?" challenged Bianca, not in the least subdued by the Boy's determined seriousness.

Her entertainer squirmed uneasily. "I'm not telling you how she got there. The fact is that she was there, and she couldn't get down from the mountain because she couldn't walk."

"Oh!" cried Bianca, her startled eyes wide.

"The magician was anxious to cure her, but he needed help," went on the Boy, mollified by the change in the little girl's manner. "Most princesses, you know, have a fairy godmother or two hanging around to do

things, but this little sick princess didn't seem to have any. She must have had one originally, for she had a gift that bore the mark of having been bestowed at her birth by a fairy, but the years had gone on, and the fairy had done very little either for the good of the princess or the care of her gift. And the magician was very much in need of some one to help him.

"So one day he took counsel with a certain wise youth, who said: 'Assuredly what she needs is a fairy godmother. I know of one and only one, and I'll hie me off as fast as my crutches will let me if you'll give me the magic of your endorsement and——'"

The Whimsy Girl was clutching at his arm, her face tense with excitement, her eyes fixed and bright.

"Boy!" she gasped. "Do you mean—— Oh, what do you mean? Is it about the doctor—and you—and me?"

A bantering retort was on his lips, but a glance at her strained face checked it.

"Yes, it is, Witchie," he said, with a mighty satisfaction in his voice. "You know the doctor hasn't made the progress in your case that he had hoped to make, and the reason is that there are too many things against him and against you, while you are here. The doctor is really a magician, and he really could make you well and make you walk if he had conditions anywhere near right. They call his magic work an operation, but you'll be game and stand it if he plans it, won't you, Witchie?"

"Sure I'll be game," she answered, with whitening lips.

"You see," went on the Boy, "it isn't possible to perform that operation without having expert help at hand. Your people are afraid of a hospital, and wouldn't allow the doctor to take you to one, and right here is where the fairy godmother comes in."

"The fairy godmother?" repeated the little girl, vaguely.

"Yes, *your* fairy godmother. Her name is Mrs. Hallowell—you've heard me tell things about her before. Her boy, Donald, was ill for years,—same sort of a case that yours is,—and Dad got him over it. You ought to see him now; liveliest little sport in his school, and a dandy fellow. Mrs. Hallowell knows all about the treatment that your case will require, so she's going to invite you to stay with her until the doctor gets you over the operation. She's coming up here to-morrow to see you and to talk to you about the arrangements."

"Coming here? A fairy godmother coming here?"

The Boy laughed, a soft, triumphant note. "Coming here to see you. Oh, you'll think she's really a fairy godmother, she's such a pretty dainty lady. She makes you believe in fairies just as soon as you look at her."

"Aw, Boy," broke in Bianca with a sob, "what do you suppose a lady fairy like that would do for a kid like me?"

"I'll tell you just what she will do," the Boy promptly answered, his face glowing. "She'll come here and talk to you in a voice that loves you, and she'll laugh at you a little bit, and scold you a little bit, and cuddle you a little bit, until she makes you feel that you've always had a fairy godmother; that you've known her forever.

"And then she'll go home and have her big arbour made ready for you, and Dad and I will take you there in the machine; it's a lovely ride down the peninsula, and you'll see all San Francisco as you go. It's just the time of year to start your treatment; it's April—the seventeenth, isn't it? And after the first little while you'll enjoy the summer in the garden, for of course part of the treatment is to keep you in the open

air as much as possible. Your fairy godmother will be with you part of every day; she'll talk to you and read you stories and pet you and let you have your own way while the nurse is resting, and she'll sit beside you and sing you funny songs when the nurse is there to make you mind. And all around you in the beautiful garden——"

"Oh, Boy, Boy!" The words came in an exhausted gasp, and the little girl lay back on her pillow. Her eyelids closed, but they could not hold back the stream of tears that flowed over her white cheeks. "You'd better cut all that out," she said, brokenly. "It's a fairy tale. I couldn't go. The old woman needs me; the kids can't comb their own hair yet; an' who'd take care o' the Steinhauer baby, the old one, that sleeps here in the afternoons? An' I promised to sew the lace on Mamie Reilly's confirmation veil when she gets it. The kids on the hill 'd miss me something fierce if I went

away. An' my father——" She choked on the word.

The Boy looked down at her in silence for a moment.

"I think—for your father's sake you'd better take the chance, Bianca," he gravely advised. "Think of being a strong, happy little girl, running to meet him when he comes home! I did hope—that maybe Mrs. Hallowell might—after you were well—— But you belong to your father, Witchie, whatever comes." The Boy turned away from her to face the truth of his words. No worldly advantage could pay for severing the bond between this child and her father. His air castle floated away on a breath, and he turned back to her. "When does he come in, Bianca?"

"To-morrow, some time," she answered. "All the fishing boats stay out three days now."

"We'll see him about it to-morrow, then.

What a reception you'll have, O Princess of the Hilltop! A fairy godmother, a magician, a wise youth, and no doubt sundry cavaliers and courtiers about your castle!" His spirits rose with his gay words, but he bent down and smoothed the pillow and covers about the little girl. "I'm going now, Witchie," he said. "Lie quiet, so that you'll be rested and not nervous when the doctor comes. To-morrow will be a big day for all of us." He straightened up and waved his cap aloft. "Hail, To-morrow! I salute thee!"

Long afterwards the idle speech came back to him, twisted by fate into a new significance. For "to-morrow" was destined to write its record in fire and terror into the history of the city.

CHAPTER VIII

EARTHQUAKE AND FIRE

THE Whimsy Girl had passed a restless night. Excitement over the plan outlined by the Boy and more fully explained by the doctor, dismay at her step-mother's criticism and querulous unbelief in the doctor and his methods, and longing for her father out on the Bay kept her awake through the hours while the stars glowed in the soft, spring sky. Dawn came in at the window—a dawn of rose and gold, and the sun shot long shafts of light up the hill before the tired little girl slept.

She was abruptly awakened, with a sensation that some monster had hold of her and was shaking her,—shaking her with violence and malice. She started up, but her

faint note of protest was drowned in many-keyed cries of alarm, for the house was rocking wildly, and its inmates were being flung about in terrifying confusion.

There was an almost imperceptible pause, and then a more violent shake sent the bricks of the chimney crashing through the flimsy roof, and filled the air with sounds of many objects breaking, while the malignant force wrenched at the foundations of the little house and left it trembling and insecure. Bianca heard a hoarse cry, half prayer, half curse, from her step-mother, and with it the frightened shrieking of the children.

The shaking ceased, and there was a strange moment of quiet, as though the world held its breath, waiting. The moment passed, and from all sides Bianca heard a babble of excited voices; the hill was awake, and the people were hurrying out of their houses in questioning fear, in panic, in dread of what might follow.

One of the children flung wide the door, and Bianca drew her first breath of relief at sight of the early morning sky and the carefree sunlight spreading its golden wealth upon the cottage floor. Nothing could be very wrong in a world under that serene sky, she thought, but she did not know that she had lived through the heaviest earthquake in the country's history. The step-mother was the only member of the family who had any conception of the seriousness of the event, and dumb with fright she was hurrying the little ones into their clothing and urging them out of the house. But once they were out of her sight she followed them in new panic, obeying the instinct to cling close to her own in the hour of disaster.

A high-pitched whistle pierced the blur of troubled sounds from without, and Spike McGinty flattened his nose against Bianca's window.

"Wasn't that a corker?" he gleefully demanded. "Ain't a chim'ley on the hill left standin'. C'n I come in?"

He followed his question at Bianca's nod, and sat down on the edge of her bed.

"Y'ought ter see our front room," he chortled. "Everythin' all mixed up;—pi'chers, an' rockin' chairs, an' the 'Lives o' the Saints,' an' winder glass, an' bricks an' ashes, all mixed up in the middle o' the floor. All our dishes 'r' smashed, an' the clock an' everythin'. You're some mixed up yerself, here," he added. "Want me ter push yer bed back?"

For the first time Bianca observed that her bed had been thrust out from the wall, and she looked about at the amazing litter scattered by the earthquake all over the room.

"Good thing the old quake did give yer bed a shove," remarked Spike, rising to investigate. "Jus' look where these bricks

fell; one o' them would 've hit you sure if yer bed hadn't moved."

It was true. The scattered brick from the chimney filled the corner where Bianca's bed had stood.

"An' oo, jiminy! Look at Ol' Man Hubbard's!" Spike shouted from the doorway, whither his restless feet had taken him. "Roof all caved in! An' Grasso's house is skewjeed an' tippin' halfway down the hill! An'—— Wow! Whee! Casey's house is afire!"

With a wild shriek of excitement Spike dashed off down the hill, and Bianca was left alone, trembling and shaken, wondering what all of this might mean. Twice as she waited the earth quivered with minor shocks, and her dwelling parted with loosened bits of its material, before Spike came back again, full of fantastic reports.

"Casey's house an' Higginses' an' Caminetti's are all gone,—burnt right up; Ol'

Man Hubbard's caught fire, too, but they put it out with Grasso's barrel of claret. An' they dragged the ol' man out just in time. An' all of the Grasso kids had to be dug out o' the cellar; the whole floor went down kerplunk. A lot o' men an' the p'liceman ripped away the boards an' got all the kids out. The Geary house was just catchin' when I left an' ran up here to tell you. That 'll burn, too, an' I'm goin' back ter see it!"

"Why doesn't the fire engine come an' put it out?" demanded Bianca.

"Dunno; but it ain't on the job."

Spike had not been told that the earthquake had wrenched the water mains, cutting off the supply of water from the city; that the electric wires were snapped and twisted into uselessness; that the disaster had laid a paralysing hand upon all of the city's utilities. But the little girl sensed something of the appalling scope of the calamity, and

her face whitened, so that Spike observed it, even at the floodtide of his excitement.

"Are y' frightened, kid?" he asked, solicitously. "Want me ter stay with yer?"

"No; oh, no, Spike," she answered, recovering herself. "I wouldn't have you miss it for anything. Run on, an' see what else is happening."

"All right," assented Spike, hilariously. "There's a grouchy Dago bunch livin' next t' the Gearys'. Y' won't catch them spillin' their claret t' put out the fires."

A wiser brain than the boy's could not have prophesied the spirit of brotherhood that was to rise out of the ruin of the city; the spirit that throttled selfishness and made all men glad to share whatever they might have of resource or comfort or good cheer.

The boy was off, and Bianca settled to another period of waiting, only to start up again at the sound of two voices, the one

harsh and broken, the other sharp with unusual excitement.

"Anina and Giovanna," she identified them, and the two little girls ran into the room.

"Here! Here! See what we got!" shrilled Anina.

"Bunches of it!" supplemented Giovanna, and they dumped a load of corner grocery candy on Bianca's bed. "The groc'ryman said take all we wanted; the town's gone, he said, an' he's movin' his whole family across the Bay. Left the store wide open, an' says he don't care who gets the stuff."

"An' we're goin' back ter get a lot more," cried Anina, and sped to the doorway, followed by Giovanna, leaving the assortment of cheap sweets in a tumbled heap on Bianca's bed.

The little girl barely looked at the gorgeously wrapped candies. There was a change in the sound of the neighbourhood clamour,

and she strained her ears to the new note. There had been several milder earthquake shocks since the first great one, and at every tremor the little house shook and strained, or a dislodged brick or loosened board fell with a crash. What could it be, this spirit of terror intruding so strangely into the sweet spring day? The sunlight was golden, the sky above her doorway was blue—was—blue no longer. A dull blur had come over it, and Bianca's swift gaze sought the window. Dense clouds of black smoke were rising beyond the group of houses that Bianca knew, and even as she watched the mass of smoke went higher, urged by long whips of leaping flame. The big downtown fires had made headway; the work of the city's destruction was on.

The fire flamed more fiercely as it swept ahead, and Bianca crouched low under her covers, trembling, terror-stricken, and longing for some one, any one, to come to her.

She did not look up again until a step on the walk roused her. She caught her breath, waiting, hoping that it might be Spike, with his cheery enjoyment of the day's big event. She saw the boy's form dart past the window, but it was not Spike. It was Johnny Steinhauer with the Steinhauer baby, and Bianca looked at the boy and learned what fear can do to a human face. His lips were white, his eyes set and staring, and he was past speech. An inarticulate word was all that he uttered as he set the baby down beside Bianca and ran out again, terror-stricken, terror-driven.

His brief visit only increased the little girl's alarm. Even the usually uncomplaining baby put in a cry of protest against the disturbed order of things, but the touch of Bianca's gentle hand soothed him, and he settled down in his familiar resting-place and vigorously chewed on a beguiling stick of the grocery candy.

There was another long interval of waiting and listening. The Steinhauer baby fell asleep, as was his habit, and he lay breathing peacefully. The roar of the great fires rose above the sounds from the street, until Bianca heard a new clamour, and out of it she caught a long-toned command:

"Out of the houses! Everybody out!"

The authority in the voice awed Bianca, though she could not know that she was listening to an order from army headquarters. The Federal troops had taken charge of the city, and General Funston's men had begun the work of driving people beyond reach of the fire.

There were cries and replies to the order; protests, entreaties; and Bianca recognised her step-mother's voice, high-pitched in altercation with the voice of authority. The warring sounds came nearer, and Bianca's heart leaped; her step-mother was coming to her at last. She was just above the house,

pleading, expostulating in her broken English, but the man's harsh voice stopped her.

"Get along, now, I tell you! Everybody out, the order says, and you can't go back into your house. Get along, I tell you!"

Four frightened little voices rose in wailing cries above the angry tones of the soldier, and Bianca heard Tonia call: "Oh, mamma, come, come!"

"Go on!" roughly commanded the soldier, and a despairing sob floated back as the panic-stricken woman hurried to the frightened babies crying for her.

The soldier came down the crazy walk, and Bianca huddled close to her pillow, drawing the covers up over herself and the baby.

"Everybody out! All out!" sounded the monotonous chant. The soldier paused at the door, glanced in, and believing the place deserted, went on.

The little girl did not dare raise her head

until several minutes after he had gone. The sound of his call softened in the distance, blended into the general tumult, and Bianca ventured to peer out. Again she heard an approaching step. But it was not the soldier. It was Jimmy Reilly, who stood at the doorway for one uncertain moment, his turkey held close in his arms.

"'R' y' there, Bianca?" he asked, in a guarded whisper. "Thought y' couldn't git away. Soldier didn't see you, did he? They're makin' everybody git out. We're goin' down North Beach way, an' we'll try to git to the ferry an' go across the Bay. The troops f'm the Presidio 'r' here, an' they're callin' others in. Y' didn't see that soldier, did yer?"

"No," breathed Bianca.

"Yer old woman had a fierce time with him; he wouldn't let her git down to you. She's gone t' the wharf t' wait fer the boats t' come in. Yer father 'll come an' git yer

after a while, an' you'll be all right, won't yer?"

"Yes; oh, I'm all right, Jimmy. Is it a big fire?"

"It's all fire—wherever y' look. People say the whole city 'll go. There isn't any water."

Into her pause of dismay came the voice of the soldier returning.

"Go on, Jimmy," she whispered, putting her head down again.

"But I don't like to leave you——" he began unsteadily.

"You couldn't take me," she said, with a sad little smile. "If you see my people at the wharf, tell my father—to—hurry!"

The soldier's cry sounded nearer. "All out! Everybody out!" and Bianca's farewell whisper came from under the bed covers. "Go on, Jimmy!" And she added: "I hope —the turkey 'll get fat—across the Bay."

There was time for no more. The soldier

had come back, and his heavy hand fell upon Jimmy just as the boy left the cottage.

"What're you doing here?" demanded the soldier. "Don't you know we have orders to shoot any one for looting?"

The boy was speechless with fear, and the soldier pushed him aside.

"Get along now,—an' don't have me tell you again!" he said. And Jimmy clasped his turkey closer and sped up the walk. Bianca was again alone, save for the baby, still asleep beside her.

A strange silence fell; not so much a silence as an absence of the sounds of human life. Occasionally the little girl could hear the distant creak of a trunk being dragged over the pavement in an effort to save a few cherished possessions of some fleeing householder; and more than once she heard a shot, fired in enforcing the orders of military control. The smoke blurred the blue of the sky, the roar of the fires and the crash of falling

walls sounded nearer, but Bianca understood little of what all of this meant. She knew only that she was a prisoner, and in the heart of many dangers.

Her kitten lay tense and still, its wide eyes eloquent of fright, and her chicken perched on a box beside her. Both little creatures were thrown into a panic by the entrance of a huge rat that ran in, dashed crazily about the room, and out again into the sunshine. Bianca soothed her pets, and as she raised her crooning voice, a faint, frightened bleat from without answered her.

"It's the Connelly goat's baby," she said aloud, and in answer to her soft call the whimpering white kid trotted in and confidingly thrust his nose into her hand.

The Steinhauer baby wakened, crying with hunger; the day had begun early for every one, and there had been little thought of food in the first hours of the panic. He had had nothing since that one hurried meal,

and he proceeded to cry through various phases of protest until he tired himself out and lay there sobbing.

Bianca petted the baby, but he turned in distaste from the candy that she offered, and fretted helplessly. The smoke was stifling, the heat unbearable, and the fire below broadened and grew until only a spreading flame filled the window that had been her moving picture, alive with fascinating detail. The little kid bleated at every frightening sound, the kitten curled closer to Bianca for comfort, and the baby's cry subsided to a half-sick plaint of hunger.

The hours wore on. The fire came nearer, and, fascinated, she watched it devour the house below her, and the trailing honeysuckle, heavy with its fairy horns. But nothing seemed to matter; her valiant spirit was growing faint in the rising tide of despair.

She hardly heard a heavy step that sounded from without, and she looked up

dazed when Mr. Steinhauer, sobbing and shaken, the tears streaming down his face, strode into the house and seized his baby. He was out again without a word to her, murmuring inarticulate love words over his little son, and Bianca's shocked sense of his heartless desertion of her found utterance in a shrill scream of protest.

A cheery whistle blended with its echoes, and Bianca held her breath to listen to the tap of swift-moving crutches on the walk. A moment, and she fell back in gasping relief to her pillow, for she knew before he turned the corner of her house who was coming. It was the Boy.

CHAPTER IX

UNDER MARTIAL LAW

BIANCA had only a faint idea of what was happening in the next few minutes. She knew that the Boy gave her water to drink out of a queer leather bottle hung on a strap; and she was vaguely aware that she ate something out of a box, but the Boy would not allow her to talk.

"It's my day for conversation, Witchie," he said. "All you have to do is to listen and obey."

There was a new look on his face, a deep-cut seriousness, for the Boy had seen the city's wounds, and could gauge the extent of its injury.

"The machine's at the top of the hill," he went on. "The doctor's at the hospital, —too busy to need it," and the shadow

again touched his face, "so I'm going to carry you off, my lady princess, and present you to your fairy godmother. That little skirt dance of the elements changed our plans for to-day, but we'll have to pick up the scraps an' patch 'em together again."

He had wrapped a bed-quilt about her, lifting her with deft, professional touches, and Bianca's interest slowly revived as he made a hasty bundle of her pillows and the rest of her bedding.

"Goin' ter take me with you?" she asked.

"Good guess, Witchie. I sure am."

"But if my father comes,—what'll he say if I'm not——"

"I don't think he'll get up the hill," said the Boy, the grave shadow again effacing his lightness. "The soldiers won't let any one by. It just happened that I knew a bunch of the University cadets, on guard below there, and they let me through the lines when I told them that I was coming to get

you. I picked up Mr. Steinhauer on the way and got him through, too."

"But, Boy," she protested, "how are you going to carry me, with those crutches of yours?"

"You leave that to me," he retorted, flashing her a smile out of the pallor of his face.

> "Why, all the fabled knights of yore
> Had only two legs; I have four;
> My extra ones are mighty good,
> Although of course they're made of wood——

"I don't need both crutches now," he broke off, swinging back into a reasoning, sober tone. "And you're going to do part of this little moving stunt yourself. Are you game, Bianca?"

"Yes, I'm game," was the steady answer.

"Your part 's to hold on tight to my neck; I'll devote my good right arm to supporting you, and will reserve my left hand for leaning upon my trusty staff. The

method may not be wholly scientific, but it'll do."

He was setting the pillows under her as he spoke.

"Ready?" he asked, slipping his arm beneath the pillows.

"Just a minute," she begged, scooping her wild-eyed kitten into her embrace and chirping to the chicken and the kid. "Now," she said, and held the kitten in the hollow of her shoulder as she raised her arms to put them about the neck of the Boy.

"Then here we go!" The Boy made a mighty lift, and almost lost his balance, so little weight there was to the child, even in her clumsy wrappings.

"Rather convenient that you're made of air, Miss Whimsy Girl," he observed, as he recovered from his surprise. "Now, then, hang on. Hang on hard. And if it makes you dizzy, close your eyes."

The little one closed her eyes and clung.

The Boy braced himself on his left crutch and started. Out at the doorway, up the hill he strained, the bleating kid trotting at his heels and the chicken scrambling after. Bianca held close, riding lightly, though the Boy felt her hold relax several times and he knew that waves of weakness and dizziness were making her faint. She did not open her eyes even when the Boy laid her down on her bedding in the machine at the top of the hill. He bent over her.

"I'm not frightened," she gasped, "but—— Oh, Boy, the air's so big outside of the house!"

"Come, brace up!" panted the Boy. "You promised to be game, Witchie." And for the first time Bianca's eyes opened upon the city of her birth, to see it in its death throes.

Now indeed the Boy had cause for alarm. The blood went out of her face, and a series of tremors shook her as she took in one after

another of the stupendous details. The breadth and sweep of the city, the unimagined reaches of street and highway spread before her, the panic of the people in the blazing streets below, the roar of many conflagrations, the falling of huge buildings, —all cut their impressions on her quivering nerves. Instinctively, as the Boy stepped in beside her, he drew her face against his breast and held her quiet.

"Get hold of yourself, Bianca," he urged. "It's pretty bad, I know, but don't be frightened. Look across this way, where the big hills are still playing Sleeping Beauty in the sun." Very gently he turned her face toward the Marin hills across the blue, untroubled Bay. The maiden mountain, Tamalpais, lay with her face to the sky and gave them the changeless view of her serene profile, and the waves danced about the base of the hills and scampered out to frolic with the mists beyond the Golden Gate. But the

Whimsy Girl turned her heartsick gaze back to the city in its agony, her big eyes filling with the woe that the fire had wrought.

"Come," said the Boy, peremptorily. "I'm going to get you out of this in a hurry. Steady, Witchie!" and he tucked the covers in about her. "Ready to start, now?"

"We won't have to leave the little goat?" she begged.

"Well, no," and the Boy lifted the small creature in beside her. The chicken was cradled on one arm, the kitten on her breast, and the Boy was about to crank the machine and start off when the Whimsy Girl stopped him with a gasp.

"I forgot — Garibaldi!" she sobbed. "You'll go back an' get him, won't you? He's in a yeast powder can back o' the kitchen stove."

"Garibaldi?"

"Yes; my horned toad."

The Boy was divided between amusement and impatience. He knew how slight was the Whimsy Girl's strength, and every moment of delay was sapping it after the terrible strain of her sudden move, but there was nothing to do but obey her.

"Of course I'll get him, Witchie." He tried to make the tone as cheerful as possible, but the effort told, and he felt her grieved gaze following him as he swung down the walk.

Garibaldi was comfortably sitting in his yeast powder can behind the kitchen stove, untroubled by the details of quaking earth and fire-razed city, and the Boy picked him up in his can and hastened back.

To his dismay he found that Bianca was no longer alone. Two of the regular soldiers had come up, and were standing at the crank handle of the machine.

"This your car?" demanded the younger of the two.

"My father's—Dr. Burchard's," the Boy answered.

"Well, I'm sorry, but you'll have to pile out and let me take it."

The Boy's face flamed incredulously.

"Take—the car? Take my father's car?"

"Orders from headquarters," explained the elder soldier, very civilly. "We have to pick up every machine we can get to haul dynamite. No water to fight the fires; the general's going to blast out a fire line;—dynamite a block or two of buildings right across the city."

It was a new and appalling idea to the Boy, this desperate resource of fire fighting, but he had a nearer concern at heart, and he rallied to its defence.

"But can't you see——"

"No, we can't!" It was the impatient voice of the soldier who had first spoken, and the Boy turned and looked at him. He

was young, evidently inexperienced, and the panic of the hour held him at nervous tension.

"But I have to get this little girl out of the city," pleaded the Boy. "I'm taking her to a friend down the peninsula."

"Can't help it," growled the man, determined and angry. "What's the matter? Kid sick?"

"Sick?" The Boy's whole heart went into the word. "She's never been well in her life; never been out of her room until this hour. My father's only begun to cure her. She can't walk."

"That's a pretty strong bluff!" scoffed the soldier, grim and unbelieving. "But it doesn't go to-day. Pile out, and give up the car!"

"But I can't give up the car!" protested the Boy. "And anyway you can't manage it even if you do take it. The model's a

new one, and you'll put it out of business if you go fooling with it."

"Then you'll stay with it and run it," was the rejoinder. The Boy looked in consternation from one soldier to the other.

"Can't you see that I must save this child?" he urged. "How can I——"

"And can't you see, you young fool, that the city's under martial law, and that——"

"Boy!" It was a tremulous, appealing cry from Bianca. "You mustn't think of me! I'm only one little girl, an' this big city has—oh, hundreds that are worth more 'n me." Her voice rose in strong emotion. "It's our city, Boy; yours an' mine,—an' it needs the car, an' it needs you!"

The soldiers stood staring at the child.

"You'll go for the—dynamite, won't you? Of course he will, Mr. Soldier. He'll put me down somewhere, an' come back an' get me when he can. I'm not afraid."

She tried to rise as she spoke, but her face

blanched with the effort and her lips tightened.

"Oh, Witchie, Witchie!" cried the Boy, bending over her, his heart torn with pain and distress.

"It's straight, Boy," she whispered, looking up at him with a wan smile. "You can help save the city, an' that's worth more 'n a little sick kid like me. I can be game—an' so can you. You'll go."

The Boy was throbbing with new zeal under her spirited words. He saw the city's desperate strait, and the picturesqueness of the detail, the desire to leap into danger in the service of the place of his birth, pulled at his heart. To help, to have a part in the saving of the city——

The moment passed, and he saw before him only the child in her helplessness, her need. He could not leave her, though every stone in the city crumble into ashes.

"Come on!" the younger soldier was com-

manding. "You'll run the car, and I'll go with you and——"

"No!"

"What?"

"I won't go." The Boy's lips were set in a hard line.

"You'll have to go, lad." The elder man spoke with grave kindliness. "You're under martial law——"

"And the orders are to shoot any one who resists," grimly added the other soldier.

The Boy looked from one to the other. They were both privates, both obeying orders; further discussion would be useless. He turned to the older man.

"Will you take care of this little girl,—help me to put her somewhere where she'll be safe until I can get back to her?"

"Sure I will," heartily assented the soldier. "She's the gamest young one I ever saw. Nothing 'll happen to her as long 's

I can help. Come. Let's get down to the foot of the hill."

The Boy started the machine, and slowly made his way down the north side of the hill. The soldiers were silent until they reached the level street, and then the elder burst out:

"'Twouldn't do you any good even if we did let you go on now. Some other guard would hold you up, and you might be worse off."

"Yes, I know." But even as he spoke the Boy was looking about for an officer, for some one in authority to whom he might tell his story. He would be willing to give up the machine now if he could but stay with Bianca.

"We'll stop here," said the soldier. "The bricks are not quite cool yet, but the fire's gone past for good; nothing left here to burn. We can make her comfortable, and I'll watch her."

Very tenderly he helped the Boy lift

Bianca from the machine. They placed her in a corner of the fire-swept space, the kitten, the chicken, Garibaldi and the little kid with her.

"I'll be back as soon as I can, Witchie," the Boy promised. "If I can get the attention of one of the army officers——"

She stopped him. "Don't think about me," she whispered. "Think of the city. I'll be here when you come back. I won't run away."

The pathetic smile that accompanied her jest was almost too much for the Boy. He hastened back to the machine and dashed away, the grim military guard seated beside him, and he did not dare glance back at the little girl whose need of his service seemed to him greater than that of the city he loved.

CHAPTER X

IN THE HOUR OF DISASTER

Two pictures stand clearly out in the narratives of many whose business kept them in the city during her dreadful struggle with the fire.

One is of a youth who dashed through the city streets in a high-geared automobile, with a canvas sign marked "Dynamite" hung to its sides. A private soldier rode with him, keeping a steady hand on the dangerous freight, but the lad did not speak nor did he look to right or left. Like some stern spirit from another sphere he seemed as he drove his powerful car, his fair hair blown behind him in the wind, his eyes blazing out of the smoke-blackened sockets, his dry lips grimly set. At times he stood forward in the car, as though to urge it to higher speed,

and then it was observed that he leaned upon a single crutch. His hat was gone, his clothing scorched in many places from too close contact with the flames that were devouring the city. For many hours he kept at his task. No one knew how many trips he made. No one knew how many loads of dynamite he delivered to the fire-fighters who blasted down great blocks of buildings, cutting a swath that the fire could not cross. In the peril and confusion of the day no one took note of his despairing attempts to get the attention of the military officers whom he encountered, that he might lay before them the story of the child who needed him. And no one knew how long it was before he succeeded, and turning the automobile over to the authorities, disappeared from the ranks of the fire-fighters.

The other picture lingers in the minds of those who regret the pitiful waste of life in the city's hour of stress.

A guard of soldiers had been set around the fire limits, and no one was permitted to pass through to the blazing section. Up from the fishermen's wharves came an excited man, demanding, begging, pleading in inadequate English that he be permitted to get to the top of Telegraph Hill.

He was headed off at many points, for no one understood his distracted babble about a little girl left alone in one of the shacks above. Many times he was forced to turn back, but he persisted. Presently at a point where the fire was most fierce the man made a dash through the lines straight for the blazing barrier between him and the road to the hill.

There was a sharp command from the sentry, but before the words were half out the spectators heard a crash, and saw the man go down under the plunge of a falling wall.

"Said somethin' about a little girl, didn't he?" one soldier asked.

"Yes; said that she was left up on the top o' the hill, but there's no one up there. I went through every one of those houses myself."

The incident went down in a sea of dire happenings on that day. The soldier could not know that he had left any human beings on the top of the hill, and Bianca, huddled with her pets in her sheltered corner of the fire-levelled space, could not know that the hour had left her fatherless.

CHAPTER XI

COMPANIONS IN PERIL

ALL through the scorching heat of the long afternoon Bianca crouched in her corner near the uncooled bricks and waited for the Boy. She was silent, save for an occasional low word to one of her pets, as she lay listening to the dreadful roar of the great fires and the horrid din of the dynamite blasts.

A few stragglers aimlessly drifted by, or were herded along by the military guard, but no one came near her. She was alert and watchful, at first, but the strain of the appalling sounds of destruction wore her into physical faintness, and she drifted into a sort of waking swoon.

The hours went on, each one adding new

terrors to the plight of the city. Toward night the soldier came to her, bringing food, queer bits that he had foraged; he also brought water, not cool and not clear, but still water, and the little girl drank gratefully.

"'Fraid your friend can't get back very soon, Sis," he offered, sympathetically. "They've thrown a strong guard around the fire line, and he can't get through unless he happens to strike me or one of the fellows that I've told about you. Can't tell how soon he'll get here. Not afraid, are you?".

Deep in her heart was a mighty quaver, but she kept it out of her voice.

"No, I'm not afraid," she bravely asserted, and the soldier went away with stinging moisture in his eyes.

The sunlight rolled up over the hill, and the shadow took its place; and when this was well established the flaming fires cast their

weird patterns on it. Through the murk of smoke a faint star gleamed, and was at once overcast. Night deepened in the sky, and against it the fire-painted smoke hung, a mass of molten metal, drifting gold.

The noise of the fire strife moved farther off, but suddenly Bianca was conscious of a new sound, a queer, faint whimpering, and she looked about. It was night, but the glow of the blazing city lighted everything, and Bianca could see an odd group coming over the tumbled brick and débris toward her corner;—a tiny Chinese woman, with three crying almond-eyed children clinging about her.

The Whimsy Girl waited until they were quite close before she spoke.

"Not afraid, are you?" she queried, glad of any human companionship.

The Chinese mother started violently, a new fear putting a tremor into her raucous tones.

"Can't you talk any English?" pursued Bianca, and the Oriental lady thrust forward the eldest of her children, a girl of about seven.

"Me—alla same—English speak," she announced.

"You don't say!" cordially rejoined Bianca. "Well, come right along an' speak. 'R' y' hungry, kid?"

"Hungry—are we—very," replied the child.

"Then here's where you get in right," asserted Bianca, and she uncovered the food that the soldier had brought her. With a word to the mother the children came forward, ravenous.

"The goat had a bite o' this, but he didn't like it," apologised Bianca, proffering a sour pickle to the smallest of the children. "Jiminy! I believe a Chink 'd eat anything," she pursued, for the small Chinese ate the morsel with avidity.

"We not Chink—we merchant Chinese," defended the eldest child. "I go public school; read 'Melican, speak 'Melican."

"Yes; you eat 'Melican, too," observed Bianca. "Why don't you give your mother something?"

Rebuked, the hungry child darted back and drew the mother into the group about Bianca, and there in the red glow of the great fire the Chinese family sat and ate of the Whimsy Girl's fare.

After a little, Bianca's guests recovered somewhat from their fright. They had been separated from their people early in the day; the father had gone back on some errand and had not rejoined them. This Bianca learned from the eldest girl, who, besides going to the public school, attended the Mission Sabbath classes, in proof of which she sang, in a funny little voice:

"A sunbeam, a sunbeam,
I'll be a sunbeam for Him."

It was hard for the Whimsy Girl to be politely grave during the performance; her weakness had slipped from her in the exhilaration of finding companions, and her spirits were pitched at their highest; but she achieved a passing semblance of seriousness, and the Chinese child talked on of school and street experiences.

"And stories?" put in Bianca, in a pause of the small girl's chatter. "Do you Chinese kids have stories?"

"Stories?" echoed Lao Tai, uncertainly.

"Yes," explained the Whimsy Girl. "Like this: Once upon a time the stars that we know are up there in the sky were naughty; they were told to put out their lights an' go to sleep at a certain time, an' they didn't.

"One o' them slipped back the hands o' the clock, an' another sang songs to keep them awake, an' they stayed out, twinkling an' playing with the world down below.

"An' the king of the skies was angry, an' he piled up those mountains of copper cloud an' shut the stars in——"

"Yes, yes," burst in Lao Tai. "That is what happens—always—when we not obey. My people—Chinese people—all obey. Once a great poet is there. The Emperor tell him cut off his own head. He cut off own head, throw it across the river to the Emperor's feet——"

"Well, that's going some," blankly observed Bianca.

"An' one other—his name I not know—they want his hands for the temple. He cut them off, tie them together, write letter that say: 'I obey!'"

Bianca stared a moment, and then shook her head. "You're 'way out o' my class, Chinkie," she observed, and changed the subject.

The Chinese baby, lovingly clutching the kitten, had fallen asleep beside the little white

kid; the eldest child was yawning, and the second girl was snuggled close to her mother. The fires blazed on all sides, and the great pall of black smoke mounted, a gigantic cross in formation, against the fiery sky. The hours were all alike; there was no count of time. But the children were weary; gradually drowsiness overcame them and they slept, Bianca and the little aliens, watched over by the Chinese mother, whose slant eyes did not close through the long night.

Toward dawn Bianca awakened with a stinging pain in her hip; the out-of-doors chill was affecting the relaxed joint, and the old suffering was renewed as she lay, fearing to move lest she disturb her sleeping companions. The pain increased, and settled into a dragging numbness that made her faint and sick by turns.

The fires were still roaring, the dynamite blasts still booming, but Bianca had only a confused sense of the meaning of the sounds.

She was drifting in a trance of pain, and she hardly roused even when the alert Chinese mother started up and drew nearer to her babies. Something must have alarmed her, Bianca thought vaguely, and turned her head away, indifferent to everything.

The rustle of soft clothing called her back. Her heavy lids lifted, and she gazed up into a lovely face framed in a soft fluff of fair hair. There were tears—tears for her—in the sweet eyes, but Bianca's amazement found no words, even when she heard the Boy's voice, tender, deeply-moved, caressing:

"Say good-morning to your fairy godmother, little Whimsy Girl. Only for her magic powers we never would have been allowed through the military lines."

The little girl gazed at him, dazed.

"I couldn't get back, you know. I tried all night long."

Bianca was too far spent for words, and

the Boy's control broke as he bent and gathered her up in his arms.

"Witchie! Oh, Witchie, you poor little soul!" he cried.

She saw Mrs. Hallowell stoop to pick up her pets, and a deep tide of content swept her under as she slipped her arms about the Boy's neck and clung to him. He carried her out, over the scattered brick and crumbled mortar, and the little girl knew no more of earthquake and fire and ruin.

CHAPTER XII

"NOT HEAVEN,—BUT HOME"

BIANCA lay in a big wheeled chair drawn up to a French window that opened on a veranda rich in blossoming flower boxes. The Boy sat on a daintily-draped rocking chair beside her, the humorous lights in his eyes glinting as he looked at her.

"It's hard to believe that it's only three days since that awful time, an' that the fire's all put out, an' that nobody's afraid any more."

"Well, you have to believe it," retorted the Boy. "Believe it good and hard, once and for all, and then forget it."

"Forget it?"

"Orders from the doctor," declared the Boy, briskly. "You're not to see the city

again until you can walk its streets, so don't hold any grudge against it because you saw it first in—well, in some disorder."

"But my own people, Boy——"

"I've told you about them," said the Boy, "so get them off your chest. They're in good hands, and they'll be well cared for. Tonia is combing her own hair and little Valencia's. Your step-mother has time enough for the others, because the Steinhauers are gone and she isn't too strenuously employed. Now you cut it all out and forget it."

He was uneasy while she lingered so close to the topic of the fire. He dared not tell her of her father, and it was difficult to prevent her from speaking of him. He did not care to have her know, either, that her little castle on the cliff had gone down, a heap of refuse lumber, under the shocks of the earthquake and the dynamite blasts. His honest soul did not take kindly to concealment, and he hurried her along.

"Tell me how you like this place," he suggested.

"*How* I like it? Why, kid, I couldn't tell you 'less I had twenty tongues, all made to wiggle at once."

"Heaven defend us!" exclaimed the Boy. "But it *is* pretty, isn't it, Bianca? This is just the room for a girl."

"It's like living in a candy box," said the Whimsy Girl. "All lace an' whiteness an' sweetness an' pinkness," and she glanced at the white enamelled woodwork, the polished floor and the gleaming mirrors of the room. "When I saw the flowers hangin' on the wall I thought they grew there, until Mrs. Hallowell told me they were just painted on paper. An' every chair in the room has a flowered petticoat on it. Some class, I think."

"Yes, a good deal of class," said the Boy, looking at the chintz-covered furniture.

"An' confirmation veils hung on the win-

dows; what d' you know about that?" pursued Bianca, her eyes round with wonder.

"Confirmation—oh, the net curtains," smiled the Boy.

"But the queerest thing of all,"—and Bianca's voice dropped in awe,—"is about the light. She jus' says: 'It's getting dark,' —an' there comes the light, in all the little glass balloons, 'thout anybody touchin' it."

"Oh, not quite, Witchie," laughed the Boy. "It's electric light, and it's connected by wires inside of the walls. She presses a button——"

"She doesn't wear buttons," asserted Bianca.

"I mean the button on the wall," said the Boy, again in amused explanation. "Here, I'll show you," and he rose to press a button in the wall switch, filling the glass "balloons" with incandescent light.

Bianca watched the bulbs, enchanted.

"Isn't it just like magic?" she demanded.

"Yes, it is," agreed the Boy, "and I'll show you something else that's like magic, too."

He carried the hand mirror from the dresser. "Look in, Witchie."

The little girl looked, and her face flushed a deep and startled pink as she recognised herself in the pretty reflection. A lace-trimmed négligée was gathered close around her, and a huge bow of rose-tinted ribbon fastened her dark, curling hair.

In deep embarrassment she gave him back the mirror. "Take it away, Boy. The kids on the hill would never know me with all these fancy touches," but she patted the lace appreciatively, and her hand stole up again to the soft silk bow on her hair. The Boy resumed his seat.

"Do you know," she confided, after a moment, "they washed me in a big pudding dish in that little room. An' 'stead of heat-

ing the water in a wash boiler on the kitchen stove, they just made it run out o' the faucet hot! Hot water right out of a faucet! Isn't that great?"

"Marvellous!" agreed the Boy. "But not more so than many things you'll see, now that you're living with a fairy godmother."

"Robert, I won't have you call me such a name," protested Mrs. Hallowell, coming into the room. "I shan't have Bianca think me anything but simply and substantially human. And you and Donald both know that I can scold upon occasion." She looked up at him with an assumption of severity delightfully absurd in a tiny blonde lady who could easily fit under his arm.

The Boy frankly laughed at her, but with a tender deference that won him a smile. Mrs. Hallowell came to Bianca, and bent over her with caressing touches.

"That's what it is to have two sons," she

said, "and never a daughter at all. Bianca, you must learn to help me deal with this masculine presumption. Fairy, indeed!"

"But you know you do seem like one," said Bianca.

The Boy laughed. "Guilty as charged," he said to Mrs. Hallowell. "But come! If we're to show your domain to the Princess of the Hilltop, let's start," and he deftly guided the big chair out to the veranda.

A tide of sweet odours from the blossoming garden beds engulfed them as they came out from the French windows, and the Whimsy Girl caught her breath in ecstasy.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "It's just as though all the cinnamon an' spice an' sugar an' orange juice—all the sweetness in the world—had been spilled right here!"

"Part of it comes from the sweet-pea trellises," smilingly said the Boy, and he indicated the blossom-laden frames.

"Sweet-peas?" questioned Bianca. "Oh, those little cloud flowers! They look like pink an' white baby clouds caught on the horns o' the green stems, don't they?"

Mrs. Hallowell smiled and agreed, as she helped guide the chair down the broad, shallow stairway into the garden.

"Oh, look!" Bianca suddenly exclaimed. "A million velvet penwipers, all colours!"

"Where? Oh, you mean my pansies," said Mrs. Hallowell. "They're my pet flowers, Bianca, and I expect you to help me love them."

From wonder to wonder they passed; through the rose garden, Bianca's delicate nostrils quivering with delight at the perfume, past the lily beds, where the excited little girl discovered "all the new baby butterflies learning to dance," past poppies that were "showing off" and petunias that "looked like rag babies"; into every charming corner of the sun-bathed garden they

went, the Whimsy Girl drinking deep of undreamed delights. But she refused to approve of the hot-house.

"I'm sure the flowers in there are not happy," she said. "They're like kids that never get outdoors. But maybe they don't know about it," she went on, her changing face shadowed again. "I didn't know until three days ago how big the sky is, and how much room there is under it for all the winds to blow."

In the next breath she discovered a new marvel, and eagerly pointed it out to the Boy.

"That buzzy thing—there—among the fairy horns," she said. "He looks like a knot of little rainbows!"

"It's a humming bird," said the Boy, with a laugh, but he was serious in the next moment. They had paused at the honeysuckle arbour, which was to be Bianca's out-door chamber, and while the ecstatic little girl

watched the "knot of rainbows," his eyes and Mrs. Hallowell's met in a significant glance. It spoke of many trying days in store for the Whimsy Girl, but it also pledged unfailing love and sympathy to help her through them.

Back again to the entrance of the beautiful house they came, Bianca in a glow of joy and wonder.

"How do you think you're going to like this place, Witchie?" asked the Boy.

"Like it!" Bianca gave a mighty sigh. "It can't really be part of the world. Is it Heaven?"

Mrs. Hallowell bent down to her. She saw the long hours of pain and patience ahead of the little girl; the weary days and sleepless nights, and the time of her sorrow, for some day she must be told of her father's death. All of this went through her mind, and her big mother-heart went out to the

child, whose way had been marked so hard. She gathered Bianca close in her arms.

"No, darling," she said, "no, little Whimsy Girl. Don't call it Heaven. Call it—home!"

THE END

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